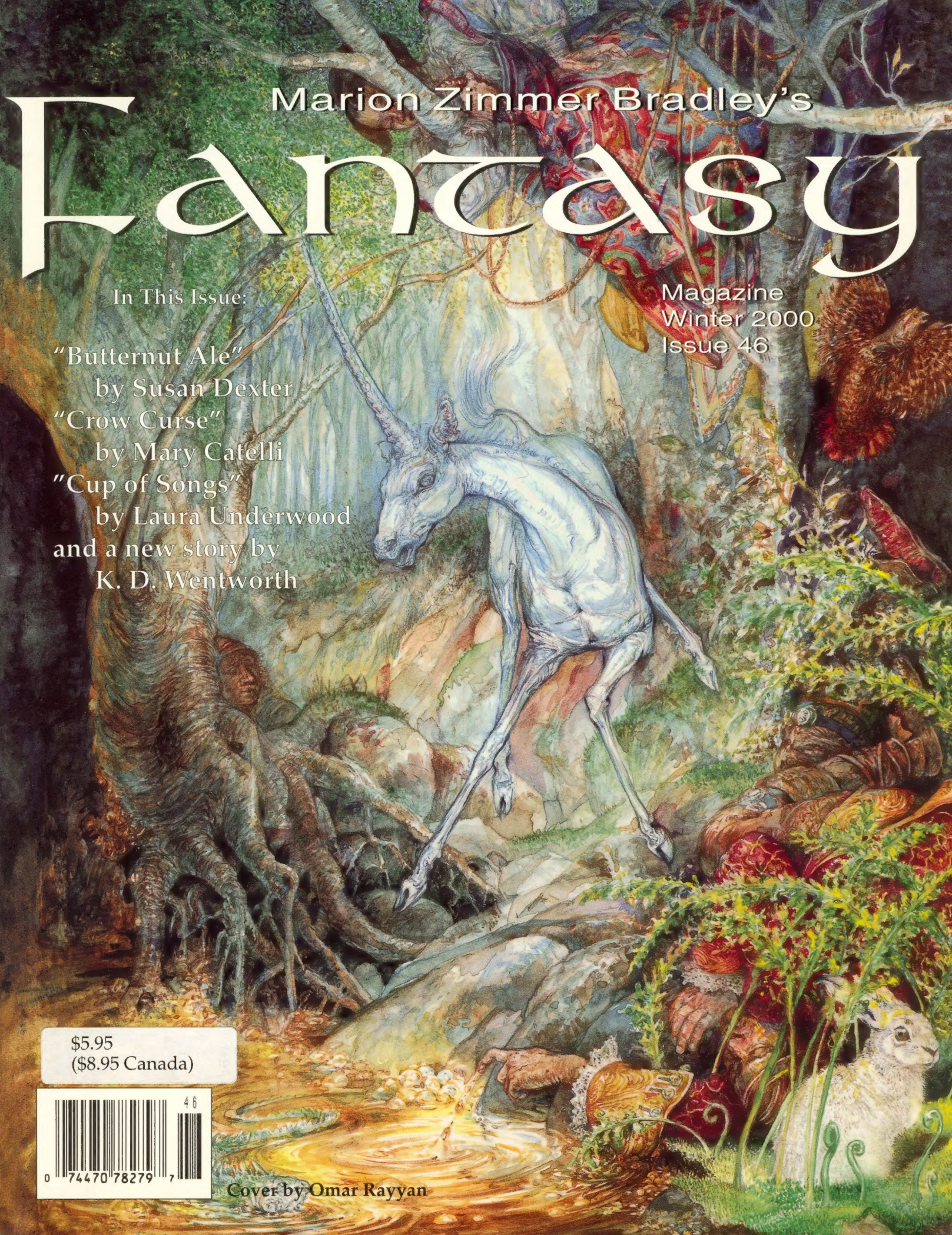


Fantasy



Marion Zimmer Bradley's

In This Issue:

"Butternut Ale"

by Susan Dexter

"Crow Curse"

by Mary Catelli

"Cup of Songs"

by Laura Underwood

and a new story by
K. D. Wentworth

Magazine
Winter 2000
Issue 46

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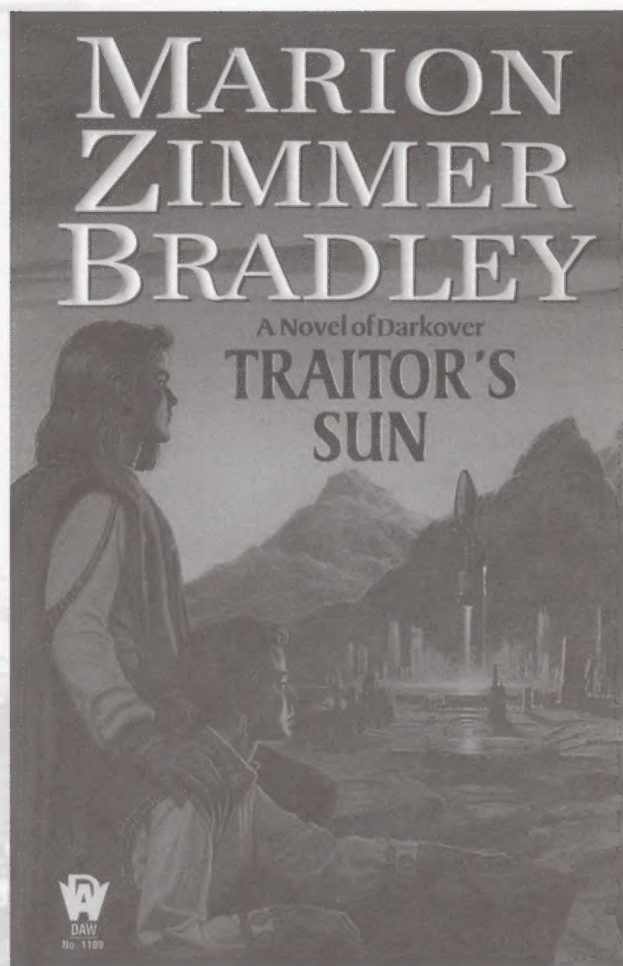
Cover by Omar Rayyan

TRAITOR'S SUN

A NOVEL OF DARKOVER

MARION
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NOW IN PAPERBACK!



As wife of the heir designate to the throne of Darkover, and mother of three teenagers, life is busy but happy and fulfilling for Margaret Alton. But when the planet's Regent suddenly dies and a revolution erupts within the Federation, Margaret and her family face a violent takeover attempt by the Station Chief of the Federation Base on Darkover. Can Margaret and her husband Mikhail face the might of Terran weapons armed only with their combined telepathic laran powers?

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Fantasy

Marion Zimmer Bradley's
Magazine

Marion Zimmer Bradley

June 3, 1930 - September 25, 1999



Photo by Beth Gwinn

"Here do we first touch the new worlds. Let us never again
fear to face the unknown, trusting that the Mind of All Knowl-
edge still has many surprises in store for all the living."

— From **THE COLORS OF SPACE**

IN LOVING MEMORY



MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY
1930-1999

Treasured Author, Editor, and Friend

The Wollheim/Stampfel and Gilbert Families and
The Staff of DAW Books

TRAITOR'S SUN

A NOVEL OF DARKOVER

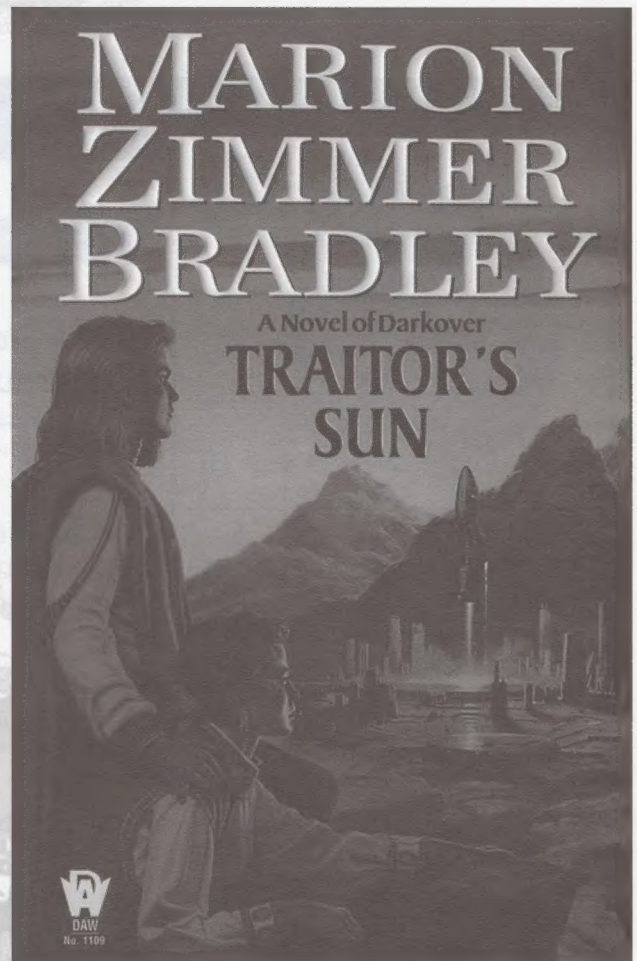
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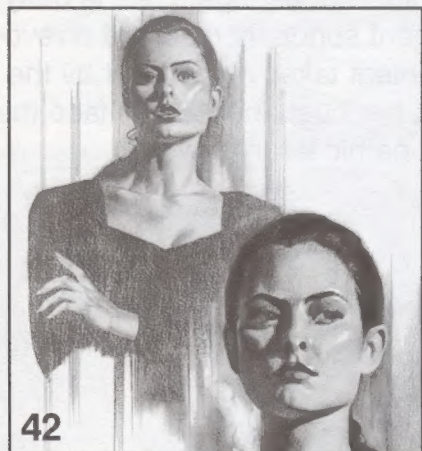
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Butternut Ale

by Susan Dexter

The stranger arrived at early evening, the hour when slanting sunlight turned the dusty highroad to gold and made an emerald mass of the forest. He wobbled more than walked — and sang as he went. As he drew nearer, Martha found that the tune was not so pleasant as the mellow evening light. Its words — once she could make them out — made no sense.

The traveler met a farm cart in the close passage between the stone wings of the bridge. The carter swore, forced to drag his beast to a violent halt. The stranger slipped past, oblivious to cart or curses. He cleared the bridge, meandered onward. A half-grown piglet foraging in the road was not so alert as the carter. It refused to give way till it was stumbled over. A squeal, a grunt, and the stranger toppled headfirst into the ditch. The singing ceased.

"Blind drunk," Jenkin judged, stretching his wooden leg out before him as if the oak could have cramps that wanted easing.

Martha discovered a chunk of unmilled oat in her heel of bread. She spat it out, while silently cursing the miller. Monopoly bred carelessness, but the village could never support two mills. And if her complaints put her on the miller's bad side, she'd find herself without the grain she needed to brew the inn's beer and ale. The piglet ran home with hurt feelings. There was no movement from the ditch. Not a sound, not a curse. Martha rose, dusting bread crumbs.

She reached the road and crossed it. Jenkin hitched his leg back under him, and followed at her heel. Habits died hard, even when no longer useful.

The sun continued to drop. The road was still the color of precious metal, but the ditch lay in shadow. Martha

squinted and had to bend close before her eyes agreed with her ears. The stranger, sprawled limp in the fortunately dry ditch, was snoring. The sound had something of the tune his song had lacked.

"Lucky we haven't had rain of late," Jenkin said, helping Martha drag the man out.

"Anyone you know?"

"Are you hinting that I'm more familiar with drunkards than you?" Jenkin's expression wavered between disgust and affront. "Anyone hereabouts that *I* know, *you* know just as well."

"I only asked." Martha joggled the stranger's elbow. She got another snore in response — softer, with the man no longer in the awkward position he had been in. There was a faint bruise on the man's forehead, but the reek of drink offered a perfectly reasonable explanation for his stupor. "I don't *want* surprise visits from old friends — or old clients."

"He's no one from around here," Jenkin said helpfully.

Martha sighed. "Well, I suppose we can't leave him lying here. Business is dismal enough, without this mess practically under the signboard. Can you take his legs without falling off your own?"

"What are you going to do with him?" There was more than a trace of alarm in Jenkin's question.

"There'll be no money paid for the back room tonight, whether it sits empty or we dump him in it." Martha shoved damp hair back from her forehead. "What did you *think* I meant?"

"Ordinarily, you've got no patience with charity." Jenkin considered, creasing his brow, still not trusting. "We could rob him. These were probably

expensive clothes — once upon a time. Maybe he's rich."

Martha snorted. "If he had anything, he's spent it on drink or had it thieved before this. His purse will be flat — or gone. And as for the clothes — those stains are never going to come out, never mind the smell."

"Just a thought." Jenkin grunted as he lifted. "Practical. Thought you'd like it, Captain." Martha glared at the forbidden title, but Jenkin resisted having his eye caught. They took the stranger into the inn.

The night was slow, as most lately were, but not so slow and miserably unprofitable that Martha wasted any part of it tending a drunk. Morning was soon enough for that. She judged that by then he'd have slept off the worst of the abuse to his system.

Her profession and past experience helped her time it nicely. Martha latched the shutters back just as her guest opened his reddened eyes. He promptly shut them again, moaning. Martha left the shutters as they were. Cheerful sunlight flooded the room.

"You'll have to face it sooner or later," she told him, brisk and without sympathy. "No cure for what ails you but elixir of time. The sun goes on rising and shining with no respect for the pathetic likes of you."

Another moan. This time, he flopped his forearm across his eyes to ward off the light.

"And I'll thank you to get out of that bed now. I air every last straw tick and featherbed each and every day, slept in or not — and I don't alter custom for drunkards any more than the sun does." Besides, her luck might change — someone might happen along who was willing to pay for a spot to lay his head that



night. "Up."

No response. Martha narrowed her eyes.

"Don't think I can't turn you out without bothering Jenkin. You obviously didn't get a good look at me."

The stranger lowered his arm a fraction — just enough to throw her a pitiable glance. Martha remained unmelted. Still ... the man did look a good deal sicker than a common hangover would answer for. He might once have been considered well-favored, but just now his features were pale and puffy. There were smudges dark as bruises under both his red eyes. His dark hair drooped damply around a face far whiter than her bed linens had ever been, even new. *Lucky he wasn't sick all over the bed*, Martha thought. Then she'd have had a sight more than

airing out to do.

Still, she'd spoken the truth. She'd no cure to give him, even if she'd been so generously inclined. Herbs and sleep helped a bit. Another tot of whatever had put him into this state in the first place was only a postponement, and less kind than the headache he had now. She wasn't about to offer a drunken vagrant her best wine — or even sour ale. But a pitcher of cool water stood on a chest by the window. The man might reasonably be thirsty, dried out by overindulgence in fiery liquids. She poured from pitcher to cup. "Here. Have some water."

"No!" The man moved fast as a panicked cat. He was out from under the blankets and huddled against the headboard of the bed before Martha had stopped the cup's sloshing. He held

both hands up, ready to thrust her away. His face was chalky. His eyes were wide. His chin was trembling.

Martha stared back. Why did the gods so love jests? Hadn't a woman enough to cope with, just living?

"The Examinations were just over," Nolf explained miserably, having given his name when he first gained coherence. "And our Masters weren't paying much attention to us. Celebrate success, forget failures, then go home for a month before next Levels start up. A big party first — the Masters are doing the same, in their Hall."

"Doesn't sound like too hard a life," Jenkin said, grinning. Martha scowled at him. Nolf didn't notice, being preoccupied with his plight.

"We'd drunk up as much as we'd

been able to buy, and run out of money — but I knew a spell that was just the trick. I was doing some advanced work toward Examination time, and I happened to run across it. It was only a simple Transformation, water-into-wine."

Jenkin sat a little straighter, his interest caught.

"Except ... well, I was drunk when I cast the spell. I guess that might have thrown my timing off, or I misspoke. I made some sort of mistake in the recitation. I'm sort of ... stuck ... in the spell."

"Stuck?" Martha frowned. "What do you mean, *stuck*?"

Nolf rubbed fitfully at his forehead, exploring a bruise. "I mean I can't get it to *stop*. Everything I try to drink

changes. It's not always wine. Sometimes it's ale, or whiskey —" he shuddered. "I didn't realize what was happening at first, and when I finally *did*, I couldn't think straight long enough to work up a counterspell. I'm so thirsty, all the time, but even a drop of water sets me off again. I can't sober up."

"You're a long way from the Wizards' City," Martha said.

Nolf bobbed his head, and winced. "I had to get away. If anyone found out what I'd done, I'd never be able to hold my head up at the College again. If the *Masters* heard, it'd be back-street conjury for me — if I was lucky enough to get posted even that high. I thought I'd have a better chance out here, away from crowds. I've got to cure myself, or my goose is cooked."

"Pickled," Jenkin corrected, amused.

"Innkeeper, I swear I won't abuse your hospitality." Nolf gave Jenkin a two-coppers'-worth earnest look. "Whatever I need to do to earn my keep, I'll do, if you'll let me rest here for a few days. The city was bad enough, but those woods, at night ... when I wasn't in any state to tell what was real from what wasn't ..." He shut his eyes, gnawed his lower lip.

"You can stay as long as you want, for all of me," Jenkin said. "But *she's* the innkeeper." He waved a hand in Martha's direction.

Nolf opened his eyes, and swallowed heavily to choke down his mistake. "Oh. I never thought ... I'm sorry."

"So am I, from time to time," Martha said. "Business is a wretched way to earn a living."

Jenkin hadn't really expected Martha to say that they were partners in the innkeeping enterprise. The omission hurt all the same. Which was foolish. 'Twas the captain's money that bought the inn, when they were forcibly retired from the mercenary trade. A one-legged ex-sergeant needed to be grateful for work and a bed — not insist that a limb lost saving someone's life entitled him to anything more than that. He fussed with one of his straps. The brass buckles were going green where the leather touched them.

She might at least have lied, and *called* him her partner. Or tapster, ostler, cook. Any or all. It wasn't as if he didn't set hand to those tasks, and many another. He had duties beyond sampling the fresh-brewed ale.

Martha was intent on other matters. Under her orders, Nolf demonstrated his malady, despite his reluctance. That day the transformation was primarily to wine, which Jenkin pronounced most satisfactory. Martha snatched the pitcher away from him before he could make a second trial.

Nolf tried to wash his clammy face at the basin, and backed away squeaking when that water too went crimson and began to bubble.

"So, it works on any sort of container?" Martha asked.

"So far," Nolf mumbled dismally, wiping at his face and ruining a towel.

"What if you started with wine?" Jenkin looked wistfully at the basin. In his past, quantity had mattered more than quality, but the sip he'd taken from the pitcher had been memorable. It whetted his curiosity.



Artwork by Omar Rayyan

Nolf folded the stained towel with sad deliberation. "I thought of that first thing. It would be logical, to reverse the spell that way." He twisted the towel. "But it doesn't work — it just makes the stuff stronger. Like distilling."

"Have you tried drinking free-flowing water?" Martha was still on the track of containers, as if that might be the missing, critical, detail. "A stream or a spring?"

Nolf nodded. "Whatever my mistake was, it was at a basic level. All liquid changes to alcohol."

Jenkin licked his lips, mentally counting the streams and forest pools that lay between the inn and the Wizards' City. Worth the walk — even on a peg leg.

"It wears off after a while," Nolf said, squelching his hopes. "I stayed to watch, to make sure, and upwelling water eventually dilutes it. But as soon as I tried to drink, whatever was there changed. Yesterday it was mead. So sweet I thought I'd choke. And it was stronger than I expected." The mead, evidently, was responsible for the singing.

"Maybe the spell can be exhausted," Martha suggested. "Used up."

Nolf considered the point. "I don't think so. It's been days —"

Martha over-rode him. "You may not have tried hard enough. Jenkin, tell the pot-boy to start pumping water. Fill all the empty barrels." Martha tapped her upper lip, thinking. "Then, you take this precocious apprentice to the cellar, and put him to work on his problem. Maybe we can wear him out."

"Well?" Martha glanced up from the ledger. "How'd he do?"

Jenkin looked at her for permission before settling into a chair. "We laid in twelve barrels of wine, two vats of butternut ale, a firkin of brandy and a few dozen bottles of assorted spirits. The pot-boy's hands are blistered, we're out of bottles, and the cat's dish is full of kumiss, so don't expect any mousing for a bit."

"Kumiss?" Martha inquired with feigned politeness.

"Fermented milk. I tasted it once, in the army. The horse nomads make it. Vile, but powerful stuff. Their shamans claim to fly, but it's probably just the drink."

"Oh. Any sign of the spell wearing off?"

"None. *He's* tired, but Nolf's spell's still going strong. That boy could make our fortunes."

"So where is he?" Martha raised a brow.

Jenkin hung his head. "I turned my back for a minute. Trying to see whether we had more bottles. He drank down a tumbler of aqua vitae and passed out. Seeing all that water must have been too much for him. He was parched, truly." Jenkin hoped to have made amends. "I put him to bed."

"Good. I'll go and lock the door."

"I don't think he *could* run off, Martha. Even if he wanted to." Jenkin scratched his left ear. "He'd never manage the stairs."

"Likely not. But if word got out, what's to stop someone stealing him?"

She tapped the ledger with a finger. "Trade's tight enough. I'd hate to lose something that could make this much of a difference. When we sell what he made today —"

Jenkin looked at her, saying nothing.

"What? Don't show me that long face, man! Are you tired of eating regular?"

"We haven't been starving, Martha."

"How much closer would you like to come to it? I had to beg the miller for credit, last time I brewed. And his fee took care of any profit we made selling the ale."

"We've restocked on the cheap. And we can do it again, Martha. But he's a *wizard* — or an apprentice one, anyway. He needs help. Don't you think we should give him some?"

"Obviously you've forgotten how



Artwork by Omar Rayyan

dear wizard-folk used to cost the Company, in fees and lives lost. I haven't."

"Martha —"

"Jenkin, he *wants* to stay. And *we're* not wizards. How would we help him?"

Nolf was a fair help about the inn, except he couldn't be asked to scrub floors or wash tankards or draw water from the well. Martha didn't care to have him too close to the customers — she didn't want him snatched, and he wasn't especially clean either, as he couldn't shave or wash properly. But Nolf did his best to brush himself up with the infrequent grooming spell, hangover permitting. He fetched and carried and lent an always-willing hand, even if his eyes were mostly shut.

Nolf stayed sober nearly daylong, nibbling dry foods and working ceaselessly at his spells. He drew them in the dirt, in the hearth-ashes, in his imagination. His progress was erratic, Jenkin thought — knowing that he was too unlettered in magic to be anything like a good judge. He only knew that Nolf looked unhappy, and frustrated — when he wasn't silly or dazed.

Nolf cooked — the wizard had a wonderful way with a beef-burgundy stew — and waited tables, and entertained customers with songs and sleight of hand, whether they requested such diversions or not. And at last, when he felt that he'd earned his day's keep and night's lodging, the wizard took a pitcher of cold water to his room and drank himself to sleep. A routine was established.

Then came a daylong rain, which fell all night and into the next morning as well. The sound of all that cool falling water drumming on the roof, splashing into the courtyard, sluicing into the barrels below the downspouts overcame Nolf's parched senses and wearied resolve. He drank a dipperful of foamy brown ale. The liquid hardly seemed to affect his thirst other than by increasing it, so he filled the dipper again. It fizzed as he touched it to his lips. By the time Jenkin stumbled over

him, Nolf was singing softly to the kitchen mop, endeavoring to seduce it into dancing with him. Half the crockery in the pantry was smashed from a botched levitation spell he'd hoped would impress the broom, and the bread was sharing the oven with a pair of old boots and half a dozen cracked eggs. The cat was hiding in the cellar.

From that point onward, Nolf attempted his chores after a fashion, but he seldom came close to sobriety — not

room and the middle of the quarrel. He collided with the table but managed to keep his footing. The chair he bumped next wasn't as lucky. "It's so *hot*," Nolf whined, warding off the expected rebuke. "I've got to drink *something*."

Martha moved the water jug out of his reach. Nolf watched her unhappily, but didn't object. Martha went back to her accounts.

And lifted her head just in time to see Nolf drinking down a vase full of foaming liquid. Wilting daisies drooped around the corners of his mouth.

Martha slapped the tabletop. "*That's enough!* I don't care *how* popular you are with the customers, this isn't funny. You can hardly stand up, and it's barely noon. By nightfall, you won't be able to find the floor to puke on it! What's got into you?"

"Salt pork for lunch," Jenkin supplied helpfully, ignoring the more literal answer.

Nolf tried hard to look sober, then hiccuped. "I'm sorry," he said, timing his words carefully to get them out between spasms. For a moment, he sounded almost normal. "I'm not — usually — like this."

"I should hope not. If there isn't a rule against teaching magic to drunkards, there *should* be."

"Not — a wizard. All — finished now. *Gone*." He

missed his timing on the last word — painfully, by the change in his expression. "*Observe*."

A moth fluttering across the kitchen blossomed into an exquisitely colored butterfly at Nolf's gestured command. Without warning, its bright wings blew off. A caterpillar dropped into Martha's hair. She shook herself furiously.

"All right! This place won't be quiet or sane while you're in it. And if word of the source of our fine ales and vintage wines reaches the local lords, one of them will steal you from me anyway — and likely wreck my inn along the way! If your pratfalls leave me an inn, that is. Solvency isn't worth this sort of aggravation. What can we do to get you cured? There must be something."

"Search — me." Nolf shrugged his



even near enough to wave to it.

"Taste this, Martha. Grapes turned to brandy right in the skins! And what that boy did with a peach this afternoon — it was more than my poor wits can describe."

"Particularly after all those grapes and peaches. Does this advance your quest for a cure, Jenkin, or are you trying to stave off scurvy?" Martha continued with her copper counting, which she had not interrupted for Jenkin's entrance.

"I thought it was interesting," Jenkin answered loftily, affronted.

"You sot."

"I'm not on duty anymore, *Captain*. You can't put me on report."

Nolf wobbled into the inn's back

bafflement, speech still being difficult to sustain.

Martha exchanged glances with Jenkin. "I think we're going to have to dry him out again."

"In this heat, that might kill him," Jenkin objected. "Besides, we've already *tried* abstinence. And overindulgence. And everything in between. Nothing works. We locked him in the shed for two days, and he just got a fever — besides staying drunk the whole next week to make up for the deprivation." Jenkin grinned. "You haven't forgotten how all those eggs got scrambled on the roof, have you? When he was out of his head and decided to work a rain spell?

"I meant dry him out till he's sober enough to think straight. Just that much."

"Noticed how long it's been since he was anything close to that?"

"I've noticed *you*, keeping pace with him! Matching him swill for swill just because you find him good company—" Martha scooped the coins into a pouch, and tucked the sack under a loose bit of hearthstone. She'd seen reverses less severe than losing a leg send a man crawling into a bottle. She wasn't letting that happen to Jenkin, not if she could help it. This besotted wizard was a complication she had never anticipated.

A noise distracted her from her banking. Nolf had sprawled across the table, his head more or less cradled upon his folded arms. As he slumped and Martha bent to the hearth, their heads were at a level. Nolf blinked at her, looking quite vulnerable. Helpless enough to turn her stomach.

"It seemed like such a lovely idea. A tame wizard about the place — but I think you're a shade *too* domesticated. It isn't right. It's indecent. If we take you back to the Wizards' City, can someone there fix you?"

"*No!*" Nolf tried to jump to his feet. He tangled his legs with the chair's, and went sprawling. He cursed feebly.

"Maybe someone in the Wizards' City

could help him," Jenkin said. "But a man's got his pride."

"Pride surely kills more men than swords ever could." Martha dragged the chair clear of Nolf's feet, and propped the wizard against a potato sack. She stared. Leaves had begun to sprout from the chair's wooden branches.

"Well, look at it his way! Who'd take him serious?" Jenkin asked. "His career would go up in a puff of smoke.



He's just made one little mistake — should he pay for it forever?"

"I can't go back there," Nolf whispered. "Not like *this*. I'd rather die here," he finished, on a note of pathetic snuffle.

Martha snorted. "You just might! Rot your wits first, then your liver, and finally break your neck on the cellar stairs. Nolf, if another wizard can help you, you've got to let us take you to one."

"Why?"

Martha couldn't decide whether the question was simply another ploy to gain sympathy, or sincere puzzlement. "Gets on my nerves, not knowing how those card tricks you keep trying come out," she said gruffly. She'd give the wizard, just this once, the benefit of the

doubt. "Now shut up, and let us work on this. And get those leaves off my chair."

"Rule out the City," Jenkin suggested. "Practically speaking, we'll never get him there, much less in secret. Who else could we try? Someone close?" And *cheap*, he thought but didn't say aloud. If Martha thought this cure was going to cost, she'd abandon it.

"The old witch, lives out past Horn Pond?" Martha began wiping the few bits of whole crockery Nolf's assorted misadventures had left her. The tankards, thank the gods, were all pewter, or she'd be out of business.

"Her? That old biddy couldn't cure a chick of pin feathers."

"She's old, but if we can get her attention, I think she knows her business." Another cup cleaned and set aside, ready.

"She might hurt him worse, though. And Horn Pond's a longish way, for a guess."

"It's closer than the City."

"Not much. You have to go the long way round the wood, or risk running into that unicorn —"

Martha slapped her forehead. "I'm as blind as you, and I'm *sober*! That's it!"

"What's it?" Jenkin was too confused to take offense at once, but he felt

he *should*.

"The unicorn. *Think*, man. What is it they do with those horns?" Martha flapped her towel at him to speed cogitation.

"Stick them into one-legged trespassers what can't run fast enough to get away?" The hurt had settled in by then, and Jenkin felt inclined to be dense.

"What else?"

"Isn't that enough?" Jenkin asked, outraged.

Martha slapped the towel down on the table, followed it with her fists. "One flash of sense, and I forget how long you've been matching that half-witted wizard cup for cup! It's *called* Horn Pond *because* of the unicorn. Unicorns use their horns to unpoison poisons, to purify water."

"And you think he could drink water from its pool without getting drunk?" Jenkin asked, plainly seeing a flaw.

"Better. I'm saying a unicorn could purify *him*."

"You need a virgin to call a unicorn," Nolf recited thickly. He looked appraisingly at Martha, his eyes crossing with the effort. "A *beautiful* virgin."

"Purify him with a horn straight through his gizzard," Martha said, teeth clenched.

The woodland was deep green gloom, far from silent. Rustling leaves and shrill bird calls could have masked the approach of a herd of behemoths. That aspect of the adventure made Jenkin uneasy, not to say jumpy. Unicorns were reported to be stealthy beasts, and unhappily aggressive. Besides which, he had a colossal hangover, and the racketing songbirds hurt his head.

Nolf was suffering similarly. When a stick cracked under his boot he started, tripped, and lurched into a tree. His cracked lips were bleeding. He licked at them, without gaining even the most fleeting relief. Jenkin felt he knew only too well what hovering this close to sobriety was costing the wizard. His own mouth felt stuffed with cotton, but he might at least swallow water from the flask at his belt. It wouldn't settle his head or calm his belly, but he could slake his thirst. Poor Nolf dared do no more than swish water around in his mouth, before spitting out sour ale.

And it was hot, in the undergrowth between the big trees. Those breezes he could hear were all many yards above Jenkin's head, wafting though the tree-tops. The air near the forest floor was close, full of moisture from growing things, heat and stench from rotting ones. All three travelers were sweating heavily by the time Martha called a halt.

She stood listening, then turned to stare in disgusted disbelief as first Nolf and then *Jenkin* crashed noisily down into the fallen leaves and nettles. "Did I mention being *quiet*?" she whispered.

Jenkin cursed under his breath and pulled at the straps holding his peg leg in place. The wood lacked the sensitivity necessary for detecting fallen branches under the leaf litter. When the leg had slipped, his knee had twisted, and he'd been too tired to catch himself after the hours of rough walking. He glared up at Martha, grabbed a

sapling and heaved himself back into foot and stick.

Nolf appeared to have passed out, but when Martha's toe poked his shoulder, his eyelids opened. His eyes were bright with apprehension in his pallid face.

"I don't hear anything," Martha hissed. "Maybe we're luckier than either of you deserves, and the beast didn't hear *us* either."

"I thought we were *looking* for it," Jenkin said. "Since we didn't bring the necessary for summoning it, we need to happen upon it." He grinned slyly, but Martha paid him no heed. She never did. Jenkin sighed.

"We'll see it," Martha said. "But not till we're ready for it, or this plan's gone sour."

"Plan," Nolf repeated, slapping at a mosquito on his cheek and then moaning when the blow jolted his head.

Martha poked his shoulder again, sharply. "Pay attention, wizard. This all hinges on *you*, besides being for your express benefit. You've got to understand the timing, or it won't work at all. Don't go falling asleep on me."

"No," Nolf said solemnly. He shook himself, and just for an instant looked closer to a journeyman sorcerer than a miserable wreck. Jenkin watched the flickering transformation with some interest. Should he meet Nolf in the Wizards' City a year hence, would either of them recognize the other?

Come to it, he didn't know the man *now*. He knew only the silly quirks that drink and hungover despair brought to Nolf's surface. Just because a man *looked* ridiculous, that didn't paint him a fool. He'd learned the hard way not to take an adversary at face value. Maybe that lesson had more to teach him.

"I know this is dangerous for you," Nolf whispered with a trace of drab nobility which hadn't come out of any bottle. "I'd like to thank you for your help now. For your kindness. In case things don't work out —"

"If they don't, it'll be worse for you than for us." Martha thrust nobility away by reflex. "The pond's just beyond those bushes yonder. See the glitter? What you've got to do now is hide, right close to the water. Wait till the unicorn comes. Weather like this, the beast'll be thirsty. You just wait, and stay out of sight."

"Awfully hard on him, lying next to

all that water. Dry as he is," Jenkin added.

"If he wants cured, he'll stand it," Martha hissed. "Now shut up! Unicorns have ears too. Watch your side, unless you want it to surprise him."

Jenkin took a firmer hold of the trunk, and moved his head back till his mouth was by Martha's ear. "Why are you so sure it'll come *here* to water?" Had some secret girlish desire to see a unicorn led her out to Horn Pond before this? The notion of a chink in her armor charmed him.

"You can see by the tracks. It comes here often. Wild animals are creatures of habit, and unicorns are fearless. The way between those rocks is just wide enough for one animal. The shallows where the deer drink are muddy. That's why the unicorn comes *here*. And why it will come back." She'd studied it like an exercise in siege craft.

"I keep forgetting you weren't always an innkeeper. Or a mercenary." Jenkin brushed a kiss at her ear, to go with the compliment.

"You're going to forget yourself right into falling out of this tree! And if you do that again, you're going to be helped with a good push. You've got the morals of a squirrel, and not half the sense."

Jenkin's retort was abandoned as he saw the undergrowth stir. "You were right. Something's coming. Too little for a deer."

"Give Nolf the signal!"

Jenkin tossed a pine cone into the pond. It landed so near to the shore that the ripples spread for only a heartbeat before the bank stopped them. Below, a white face turned up, then ducked down again.

"He's ready," Jenkin breathed to Martha.

The unicorn came through the bracken ferns, lovely and terrible as a winter moon. It was not so much smaller than a deer as it was finer, as if its bones were covered with gossamer in place of gross flesh. Jenkin supposed no fly would dare follow it, far less bite. Its therefore purely decorative tail was white as a star, or a bearded comet.

At the other end, the beast's horn flickered like lightning, turning the forest about much darker by contrast. Jenkin trembled, not believing it possible that a unicorn would not sense three impertinent humans hiding — and hiding poorly at that — so near to it. He could too easily imagine that bright horn stained heartsblood red.



Nolf waited, under ferns and nearly in the pond, damp all along his belly from the wet earth and soaked everywhere else from nervous sweat. He knew well enough what he was to do — he had helped them decide it the day before, in the inn's kitchen. Being half-way to a wizard, he had the authority to decide whether this scheme would work. The right to plan his life's risk-ing.

Martha had placed him with care. He was downwind of the creature. It would not scent him, but Nolf smelled the unicorn — the fragrance of violets and jasmine came to him on the breeze, along with a hint of fresh-turned earth. His skin prickled. He couldn't see the beast yet. Then the unicorn lowered its head.

The horn slanted into his view first. Its twisted length was lustrous as pearls, white and ivory, lavender and dawn pink. The tip touched the breeze-ruffled water of the pool. It was true,

then — a unicorn will always test the water ere it drinks. And now, another test, came Nolf's moment.

His fingers flashed out, fast as darting fish, into the pond. The noise he made might have been a trout splashing up to take a fly. The unicorn certainly paid it no heed. It lowered its dainty muzzle to the water and began to drink.

The day was warm, even for the season. By the time the unicorn noticed the unusual taste of the pond water, it had swallowed more than a gallon of strong brown ale. It snorted, but evidently liked the taste. It drank again, deeply. When its thirst was slaked, it lifted its lovely head to breathe and reflect. It wobbled upon its slender legs. Its cloven hooves were splayed imprecisely.

"What's he doing?" Martha hissed, shifting precariously on the limb. Nolf *should* have been leaping to his feet. He *should* have been grabbing the magic

horn, snatching his cure while the beast was drink-fuddled. And instead —

"He's drinking!" Jenkin said, and dropped out of the tree.

He landed on his knees and hands by choice. Awkward, but he'd do worse if he tried landing on his feet, since one leg was his by birth and the other only by recent adoption from a carpenter. Jenkin didn't bother to stand. He crawled swiftly to the pond's edge.

Nolf had a foolish look on his face. The spell-made drink that day was evidently somewhat stronger than plain ale. He licked his lips, happy. Jenkin grabbed a double handful of Nolf's clothing and hauled the wizard away from the pond. Nolf struggled to get back to his creation. The two men wrestled about, struggling nearly under the unicorn's splayed hooves.

Martha untangled the rope she and Jenkin had used to climb into the tree. She quickly transformed it into a lasso. Her first cast missed the wavering horn by a finger length, and she was forced

to reel the rope back in for another try, cursing. The unicorn tossed its proud, befogged head and looked about to see what had bumped it. Finally, the tussle on the ground in front of it drew the beast's whole interest.

It dipped its head, wanting to get the two men into focus. The horn swept down like a scythe. Jenkin squeaked at the near miss — the sharp tip had almost grazed his nose — and rolled over on top of Nolf. He grabbed Nolf's hands so as to have them where he wanted them. He couldn't rely on Nolf's remembering what he was supposed to be doing, obviously.

"You think I limped all the way out her, *with a hangover*, just so you could get drunk in a pastoral setting?" Jenkin yelled. "You could have done *that* at the inn, and we'd *both* have been comfortable!" The more he thought about that, the more his outrage grew. Nolf blinked at him, dazed. Almost sober.

"Let go of my hands," he whispered. Jenkin did.

The second time the unicorn's horn swished over, Nolf seized it with both hands. When the startled unicorn tossed head and horn up, Nolf held on. He didn't let loose when the beast tried to run, when it tossed him like a rag caught on the horn's point. The horn, detecting poison albeit of a very strange sort, commenced glowing and vibrating. The process must have been as uncomfortable as it looked, but Nolf still hung on. Terror seemed to lend strength to his resolve.

Then the glow faded abruptly inward, its work done. The wizard got a very odd look on his face. Relief, possibly, but there was something in it of shock as well. Nolf slid fainting to the leaf-littered mud.

The unicorn drew back, shook its head clear, then reared and gathered itself to charge.

Jenkin called a warning, but the wizard didn't respond. As the horn lowered like a swordsman's point-in-line, Nolf didn't stir. Hooves drummed. Martha cast once more, asked too much

of balance and the bending pine limb, and toppled out of the tree, screaming with frustration. The instant she landed, Martha drew breath and yelled again.

Her hope of distracting the beast failed to take drunken singlemindedness into account. If the creature heard her, it still didn't swerve. The unicorn's charge continued uninterrupted and well-aimed. Nolf raised his head, and blinked. No telling whether he was cured or not. He made no attempt to save himself by casting a spell. Time stretched, then ran out.



Jenkin rolled on top of the wizard, and took the unicorn's thrust — straight into his wooden leg.

When Jenkin awoke — the unicorn had battered him in the process of working its horn free of his leg — Martha had already wiped the first tears from her face. She denied any others as mere drops of sweat. Nolf, recovered, was stroking the head of the still intoxicated unicorn. Bit by bit, he worked at its horn, whittling a new sharp tip — the original had been snapped off in the oaken leg. Nolf was preserving the shavings with greatest care — they were most useful magically, he explained, and normally difficult to obtain. The unicorn snored, with an occasional hic-

cup break.

Jenkin sat up, surprised that he could, and that the movement didn't hurt all that much. With Martha steadying him, he examined his leg.

The straps had twisted and cut his stump, but the rigging had held, and the tough wood wasn't so much as cracked. He'd be able to walk well enough, though Jenkin didn't expect to enjoy the journey homeward any more than he'd liked the trip out. Gored by a unicorn and lived to tell the tale! Maybe

he shouldn't have retired from the mercenary life after all.

"There's a piece of horn still in there," Martha said, rubbing the leg as if it could feel. "For luck."

"We'll need it," Jenkin jerked a thumb at Nolf. "He can go back to the Wizards' City now. We're stuck here. Running an inn — the only inn — in the same county with a unicorn that's developed a taste for butternut ale by the gallon."

✱

SUSAN DEXTER has written seven fantasies, ranging from *THE RING OF ALLAIRE* in 1981 to *THE TRUE KNIGHT* in 1996. Her short fiction has appeared in the anthologies *EXCALIBUR* and *ONCE UPON A TIME*, as well as the *Magazine*

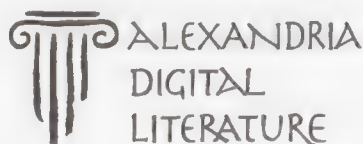
of Fantasy and Science Fiction, *The Writer*, *Horse Illustrated*, and *The Ricardian Register*. She writes: "Martha and Jenkin have been with me for fifteen years or more, series characters who somehow never got a series. They live in the world of my first trilogy, and I'm sure they've had many a thrilling adventure—I just don't seem to be privy to any of them except this, the first one."

OMAR RAYYAN began drawing unicorns at the age of two and hasn't gotten the opportunity to do one unicorn job since. But magazines, children's books, and gaming cards have been keeping him busy, and he is currently working on a non-unicorn children's book from his tiny cottage in West Tisbury.

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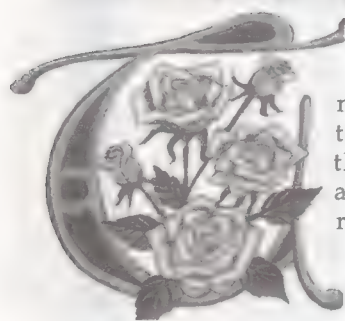
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What the Roses Said

by K.D. Wentworth



he flowers whisper to me all the time, the cheeky things. They absolutely refuse to leave me alone, even though it's com-

pletely one-sided, just them, rattling on, and me, there on my knees, weeding and mulching. They rarely acknowledge a direct question, much less answer one, but on the other hand, they never shut up. Some days, when I venture into the backyard, I swear, I can't hear myself think.

The lilies, silly vain creatures, don't amount to much with their long elegant faces, dreaming away steamy summer days in exotic visions of smooth, curving thighs and petal-soft lips that dance over your body like the kiss of the summer breeze.

The irises are more practical with their earnest discussions of the sway factor of New York skyscrapers and

the stress ratios of railway bridges in Scotland. They argue all day about accessibility and gradients and engaged columns until my head aches.

The creeping phlox have tiny angel-voices that I have to bend down to the ground to hear. They speak of light made from spun joy and ethereal realms beyond the light and silvery songs too sweet to bear. Listening to them makes me cry hot golden tears, but ten minutes after I go back into the house, I can't remember why.

But the roses, with their heavy, fleshy heads nodding in the hot sun, they are the dreamers. They tell of magnificent empires that never came to pass, and wise words whose speakers were murdered before they could utter them, splendid kings whose mothers never brought them into the world. The crimson tea roses know the secrets of drowned Atlantis and what vultures screech to each other while they soar the air currents above the Himalayas. The lemon-yellow climbers understand what Zen is and how to explain it to anyone. The white roses edged with

peach have preserved each lost secret of the heart that the Jews carried with them into Auschwitz, and there isn't a rose in the garden that doesn't have an opinion on whether or not God is dead.

So you can see why a person shouldn't pay too much attention to roses. One minute they're plying you with the secrets of the ancients, and the next, they're explaining why Marilyn had to shoot Jack Kennedy. Bizarre stuff, you know. Only an idiot would listen.

So why did I? It must have been all that nonsense about Xanadu. A part of me had always wanted to believe it was true. I had been restless that day, uncomfortable somehow, as though I'd stuffed myself with too much Thanksgiving dinner, or seen six movies in a row. I couldn't stay in the house after I got my son off to school, couldn't bear to be closed in one minute longer. I bolted out into the clean, warm May air, snatched up my gardening tools and a bag of mulch, then sank to my knees in the grass beside the flower bed. As I took up my trowel and went



to work, a dwarf bush of luridly hot-pink roses swayed in the breeze and prattled on about "pleasure domes" and "that rascal, Kubla Khan."

"Oh, he was a real looker." The blooms had passed their prime, their petals already browning around the edges and scented with the over-sweetness of impending corruption. The breeze played with the loose tendrils around my face as I dug out the taproot of a persistent dandelion.

"He had long black raven's-wing hair all slicked down," the roses continued, "and a thousand hot little handmaids just swooning to soothe his brow, although that wasn't the part that wanted soothing, if you catch my drift."

I tamped crushed pecan hulls into the hole, then sat back on my heels and wiped the sweat on my forehead.

"And then there was the pleasure dome made of silver and ivory and gold, where he kept the ones with the big garbanzos — I tell you nothing smaller than a pair of goddamned melons got through *that* door."

Men! I shook my head and dipped out another double-handful of mulch. Xanadu or Peoria, they were all alike. How depressing. The wind played over my face, cool as a frosted mug, strangely fragrant, reminiscent of something wonderful that I couldn't quite call to mind.

"It's sad, isn't it, Marie?" A faded pink petal drifted to my knee. "Your daughter is almost old enough to fly, and once she's gone, she'll never look back."

"What?" I looked up. "What daughter? What are you talking about?"

"The one growing in the back of your mind, your shadow-child," it said, then the whole bush was off reminiscing about the mythical glories of the third Reagan presidency that had never come to pass, how the nation had remade itself in Hollywood's image until everything gleamed like polished brass, yet was hollow at its innermost core.

What child? A half-forgotten memory nagged at the back of my mind. I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, a flash of gray eyes, the jounce of black curls. "Aaron, is that you? Robbie?" I craned my head, but the yard held only the long beds of flowers swaying in the hot afternoon breeze and an empty swing set. Sweat trickled down my neck and I wondered at myself. My husband, Aaron, was at work, doing whatever incomprehensible thing it was he

did with computers, and my eight-year-old son, Robbie, wouldn't be home from school for hours. I was alone.



seen as withdrawn at breakfast as he had for the last several months, something to do with a big software installation for a client, using a program that wasn't formatted properly for the company's needs. Last night he'd stayed late, as he had nearly every night for the last month, getting home at eleven.

His face could almost have been the face of a stranger as he backed our station wagon out of the driveway, someone who tossed and turned in my bed, slept after a fashion, dreamed hectic dreams that didn't include me. I often lay sleepless beside his lanky, outstretched body, listening to the crickets sing of love and passion outside, missing the laughing, wicked-eyed boy who had promised me a lifetime of sunshine and roses when we married, ten years ago.

When Robbie came down to breakfast, tousled and out of sorts, I sent him back to his room to put on jeans *without* holes in the knees, then watched from the sidewalk as he trudged head-down to school a scant four blocks away. He had his father's coloring, straight hair of dark russet, and creamy skin straight out of a Titian painting. With my dark springy curls and olive complexion, the legacy of my Italian ancestors, I often felt coarse and common as an old shoe next to the pair of them.

With a sigh, I donned my gardening gloves and took up my trowel to weed the beds lining the walk to the front door.

"Look at all that black hair and those gray eyes," the lilies drawled as soon as I got down on my knees. "What a coup that liaison was. Her father would be proud."

"He is proud — is proud — is!" the phlox chimed in their tiny bell-voices. "He sings Marie's glory throughout the heavens, sighs it over the pyramids and against the underside of each new-

saw Aaron off to work again at seven the next morning. His sharp features were pale as marble, the skin so translucent that the red shadow of his beard was visible, although he'd just shaved. He'd

born leaf, how he aches for her, how he dies for her each night, though they can never be together."

Black hair? Who were they talking about now? I gritted my teeth and dug into the warm crumbly earth for a persistent weed runner. There was no point in responding to them; they never listened or made any sense. I'd learned very young that children who repeat what lascivious lilies say get their mouths washed out with soap. Women who admit conversing with phlox and roses are asking for a long-term relationship with therapists and medication. Aaron and I had never so much as discussed the subject. If he had any curiosity about the amount of time I spent amidst the flowers, he never voiced it.

The breeze caressed my cheek, faint as a sigh, cool and intimate. I flashed back to a crisp fall evening last year, when my son lay asleep beneath his Ninja Turtle posters and Aaron was working late, when I huddled into a battered old jacket and sat with my shoulders propped against the backyard fence, my ears rapidly numbing with the chill while I eavesdropped on the fading mums.

They whispered to one another in dry flaky voices of touchdowns converted and fabled bowl games, of running plays whose fame would live forever and balls spiked over goal posts. I leaned my head against the chain-link fence and pictured broad-shouldered football players leaping, arms extended for a pass in a supreme effort they would remember the rest of their lives, and baseball players rounding the bases with a clean, long-limbed grace. Wanting sliced through me until I could hardly breathe; even the flowers knew more about life than I did. The world was so incredibly vast and varied and wonderful, and yet, without meaning to, I had settled for such a small part of it. I longed to split my skin and soar into the singing, star-pierced darkness, never to return.

The wind rattled the dead leaves still clinging to the old maple in the middle of the yard. It carried that telltale frosty bite that spoke of carved pumpkins and dime store skeletons and fake tombstones propped up in the yard. The voices of the mums subsided as the wind picked up, shrilling now through the fence and the bare-branched trees. In the rushing against my face, I heard another, different voice, deep and so

norous, sad and joyful at the same time. *I have watched you since you sat in your stroller, it sighed, an enthralled, chubby-fisted toddler listening to what others never hear.*

I stiffened. "What?"

The wind shifted, cocooned me in a sensual tunnel of chill, rushing air. *You played in my breezes, raced my gusts, laughed in the face of my rages. You are meant for more than this mundane existence, trapped inside closed walls.*

"Who are you?" Shivering, I lurched to my feet. "What do you want?"

Come to me, the voice said, and we will make such a child as the world has never seen.

The words resonated through my skin down into my bones, down into those parts of me that Aaron never touched, no matter how passionately we made love. I saw all the faraway, nonexistent places the roses talked of, heard the sweet words never spoken, trembled at the caress of powerful unseen hands. I was on fire as dead leaves skirled around me and the swings clanged against the metal legs of the swing set.

The whirlwind pulled me up onto my tiptoes, straining toward the stars. *Say yes, he breathed into my blood, and part of you will fly through the darkness each night, and each day, race the sun.*

"Yes," I forced out through burning lips. The whirlwind spun, faster and faster until the stars were a cold bright haze and I glimpsed the entrance of a long obsidian tunnel through which I could not pass.



I awoke tangled in the tattered remains of the mums. The night was still as a downed plane, leaves tumbled everywhere, and I could not remember what I had been doing out in the glittering, silent cold. I stumbled into the house and washed my face, then combed the brittle bits of dead leaves out of my hair.

Aaron came home an hour later. He had been delayed by the wind storm, he said, a blast of straight winds out of the north at over seventy miles per hour. Trees had fallen all over town, taking down power lines. He had been beside himself with worry, but the phones were out and he couldn't get

through. He caged his arms around me and rested his head on mine, trapping me in the hollow under his chin, even though he knew I hated that helpless feeling. Thank God, he said, that we were both safe.

I put that night away with the winter sweaters. It was steamy summer now and the mums were only mute green leaves straining toward the sun. No one else knew anything of that night. And anyway, it was all over now, wasn't it?

A childish laugh hung in the air; the breeze gusted suddenly through a row of hanging geraniums, making them sway violently. Dislodged red petals cascaded over my head and shoulders.

I hugged my arms around my ribs, then turned to follow a flash of motion in the corner of my eye.

The yard was empty.



hat face," sighed an indolent lily the next day. It stretched long white petals in the breeze. "She has the face of an angel, soft and sweet and knowing."

I pushed sweat-dampened hair out of my eyes. "Whose face?"

"What I wouldn't give to touch those lips just one time," the lily continued. "So young and full, so —"

Infuriated, I seized my gardening shears and snipped the offending blossom off. "— sensual," it said, lying on the mulch, its husky voice trailing away. "Full and red ... against that ... white white sk ... in ..."

The heads of the remaining lilies bobbed, but wisely remained silent.

Something tickled in the back of my mind, a flicker, a sigh, nothing I could put a name to. I sat back on my heels and tried to recapture the feeling. It was like the flutter within when I was carrying Robbie, like being filled with baby butterflies.

"She'll bring you joy," the phlox chimed up at me, "as well as pain, but isn't that the way of the world?"

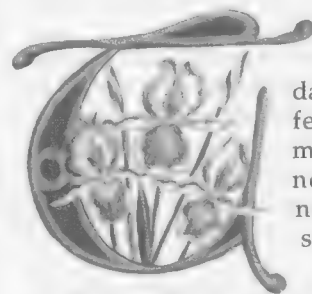
"Who?" I demanded sharply. "Who will bring me joy?"

"Part of her is coiled within your mind like a baby bird tucked inside an egg," they said, "and the rest exists in that other place beyond sight and

sound. She shines silver gold diamond bright and will bring a certain humanity into her father's realm. That is to your credit."

"But the price," a drooping tea rose countered. "Will it be worth the price she has to pay?"

I closed my eyes. "There is no child, and no price either! It's all just the same stupid stuff as always, lies and fantasies!" I stumbled into the house, breathing hard, then pressed my back to the chill coolness of the refrigerator and slid down to the floor, trembling, gripping my knees hard against my chest. I couldn't let myself get drawn into that make-believe world the roses talked about. It did no harm to listen to their fantasies, and perhaps even dream a little, but I couldn't take any of it seriously, or I would lose my place here in the real world where I had a husband and a son who loved and needed me. If I let go, I knew I would never come back.



hrough the rest of the day, the flickery feeling inside my head grew, nothing definite, just a subtle pressure like an idea forming just

below the surface of your thoughts, or a memory floating just beyond recall, tantalizing and elusive. I kept seeing movement out of the corner of my eye, heard whispers when no one was home, felt that *something* was imminent, perhaps *someone*.

Aaron stared at me across the dinner table as I served overcooked tuna casserole. "You seem tired." His dark-red brows knotted. "Did you work too long out in the hot sun today?"

At the end of the table, Robbie kicked his chair with a rhythmical insistence. "Stop it!" I hissed at him, then bit back a stream of even angrier words. I looked up and met Aaron's concerned gaze. "No," I made myself say quietly, "it wasn't that hot. I like working in the garden. It helps me unwind."

Robbie dropped his fork into his plate with a clatter. "This is gross! I want a hamburger!"

My hands knotted on the tablecloth as I stared into his petulant face. He seemed alien, like some stranger's child. "Go to your room!"

His face twisted. "But —"

"Go to your room, Robbie," Aaron repeated firmly. His narrow face was drawn. "I'll be up in a minute and we'll talk this over."

We both waited while Robbie's footsteps beat a furious tattoo up the steps, then Aaron folded his napkin on the table and leaned toward me. "Marie, are you pregnant?" he asked in a low voice.

"Pregnant?" I echoed. He reached for my hand, but I snatched it away. My skin crawled at the thought of being touched, held, imprisoned in any way. I suddenly knew I had to get out of the house before I went crazy.

"You've been moody for weeks now." His adam's-apple bobbed in his slim neck. "Maybe you should go to the doctor and get a check-up. You might need vitamins."

"I'm fine!" A tight lump formed in my throat. "I'm just tired. All I need is a little time by myself."

"All right." He shoved his chair back from the table. "I'll take Robbie out for a hamburger and a movie and give you a chance to calm down."

I pressed my hands over my eyes until I saw hot red stars behind my eyelids. His measured steps went up the stairs, then his even voice explained to Robbie that "Mommie was tired" so they were going to have a "boys' night out."

Robbie answered, something querulous and too low for me to hear. They came back downstairs, two sets of competing rhythms, one deliberate, the other quick and angry. Then I heard the creak of the garage door, the starting rumble of the station wagon. *Don't go*, I told them silently as the car's engine receded. *I'm sorry. I didn't mean it.*

I rushed outside and turned face up to the setting sun. The evening breeze played over my skin, twirling wisps of my hair around my cheekbones. I felt the pressure behind my eyes, back in the recesses of my mind. Something moved, flickered, waited.

A bush of fading yellow roses sighed. "And then Jack built Marilyn a beautiful villa out on the Côte d'Azur on the coast of France," they said in a throaty chorus. "The knowing eye of the sun set every evening on their entwined golden-tan bodies, lying naked on the rocky cliff above the pounding, brine-scented sea. They lived on steak and champagne and love and never, ever looked back."

I pictured them, two perfectly suited lovers who had cast fame and family and career aside to live completely within each other, she, always young and white-blonde and radiantly happy, he, forever fit and smiling, finally at ease. In my mind, Marilyn waved down at me from the cliff, her cottony hair streaming back in the breeze. I was expected up there for dinner where we would drink wine and talk about the thousand colors of the sea, and whether gulls really knew the wind's name.

I buried my face in my hands. "It never happened," I whispered. "It's not true."

"Everything happens," the roses said, "everywhere and all the time. You have only to look."



When Aaron and Robbie returned, they looked at me warily, as though I might explode, but I feared more that I would break and lie shattered at their feet, and then there would be nothing left but to sweep my remnants away.

I held my arms out to Robbie, but he lowered his head and stumped up the stairs. I started after him, but Aaron caught my arm. "He's worn out," he said. "He'll be his sunny old self in the morning."

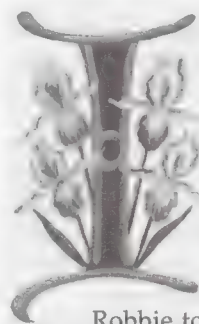
I gazed up the steps. Even as a baby, Robbie had been a dour child, colicky, petulant, and demanding. I could not remember anything of sunlike radiance in his nature.

"You're tired too." Aaron caught my hand and drew me into the shadowy recesses of the hallway. "Why don't you come to bed?"

I let him guide me into our bedroom, let his strong hands undress me with a tenderness I thought he had discarded along with his old college textbooks and worn-out jeans, let him push me back against the pillows and make love to my body until I almost could remember why I had married him.

Outside, the windows rattled as the wind shrilled against them, desolate and lonely. I closed my eyes and pictured the two lovers standing on the cliff at midnight, entwined in each other's arms, staring out at the lake of

molten moonlight spread across a dancing sea.



In the morning, I pulled on a pair of cut-offs and a t-shirt, then wandered into the kitchen, heavy-lidded and ravenous, and found a note propped up on the table saying that Aaron had taken

Robbie to school. I crumpled it, then raked my fingers back through my tangled curls. The smell of burnt bacon permeated the kitchen and the house seemed to vibrate with stillness. I felt as though I would die of suffocation if I stayed inside one moment longer.

I rushed out into the backyard, turning my face up to cool morning air that smelled of roses and honeysuckle and dew-drenched grass. Bees already buzzed back and forth from the flowers, and my bare feet squeaked across the lawn.

"It's almost time," the lilies said as I neared. They nodded their sleek white heads. "You can feel it now whenever she comes outside, that sense of expectation like a curling wave about to crash upon the shore."

"Don't talk about me as though I'm not here!" My voice cracked with anger as I dropped to my knees beside the flower bed. "I won't have it!"

"But will she survive?" a Dutch iris, royal purple striped with gold, asked. "Can a person part with that much of her spirit and still exist?"

"It doesn't matter," a salmon-pink tea rose said. "Bearing *him* a child is such a great honor that she should of course risk anything, *do* anything that it might be so."

Fear coursed through me. I began to perspire, and I felt full to bursting, as though any second I might split my seams and spill the contents of my soul into the bright morning sunshine, leaving behind only an empty husk. I huddled beside the flower bed, clutching my head between my hands, struggling to contain ... something. I did not know what.

The breeze stirred, rustling through the saw-edged leaves of the rose bushes, fluttering the branches of the maple overhead. Pain surged inside my head combined with wrenching sorrow and a fierce, unexplained joy. I felt the rich

riot of life around me, the great blaze of the sun, the briny excitement of the seas, the thrill of mountains battling the wind and rain and snow. There was so much more to the world than I would ever know, more than I could ever possess in a thousand thousand lifetimes. The breeze danced over my face, kissing my eyes, my nose, then picked up until it was a stiff wind, and then strengthened into a howling gale, driving the clouds overhead across the sapphire sky as a dog herds sheep.

I clutched my head harder, biting my lip against the pain that threatened to split my skull.

Let go, he whispered. The time has finally come.

No! I tasted the flat-iron of blood from my cut lip.

If you do not, he said, then you will both die. There is no going back to what was.

The pressure inside my head built, like nails were being driven through my skull from the inside out, like an explosion of steam about to go off.

Do not be afraid, he said. Beginnings are difficult but necessary. Release her into the realm of her father where she will possess the world with all its attendant joys.

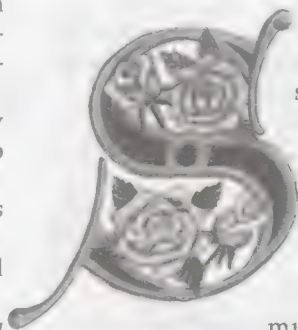
The wind roared over me now, loose leaves flying down the street, bits of cut grass, broken twigs, smashed paper cups, clanging aluminum cans. The sun was blotted out by roiling heavy gray clouds, the wind howled around the beleaguered trees and the houses, driving relentlessly south. *Let go.*

I cried out, the sound lost in the force of the gale. The wooden fence behind our house fell with a creaking groan. Potted plants tumbled past, rolling out of sight or smashing against the house next door. I felt myself tumbled against the solid trunk of the maple.

Now, he said. Give our child life.

The pressure inside my head soared, rising higher and higher until something within ... finally ... *gave*. A great scream tore out of my lungs, loud enough to be heard even over the shrill roar of the wind. I hovered on the brink between life and death, terrified, lost.

And then I soared free.



Sometimes, when the day seethes with sunlight and thickens with the scent of roses, I visit her, play with the black curls that trail down her neck, murmur fond en-

dearments into her ear. She cocks her head, her round face tranquil, although she rarely answers. Her capable fingers are caked with dirt and green with grass stain. She wipes her hands on her thighs, smiles, then picks up her trowel and digs at the stubborn roots of another weed.

I never stay long because the world is too full of wonders, purple-gray mountains that pierce the sky, waterfalls that cast themselves against the earth in shattering rainbows, football games and deserted castles and climbing children and lovers standing upon sea cliffs, their arms locked around each other's waists. It all belongs to me now, and so in a way, to her. I see it all for both of us, and she understands. We were, and are, one.

My father sweeps his great mantle around me and we whisk away to see some other miracle I have not yet wit-

nessed, a flight of flamingos, a parade in Moscow, the cheerful trashy dance of the French Quarter on a Halloween night. He is kinder now, more thoughtful, less likely to throw his shoulder against the world in loneliness and wreak destruction. He still visits her often.

Next year, he says with a soft murmur, she has promised him a son. *

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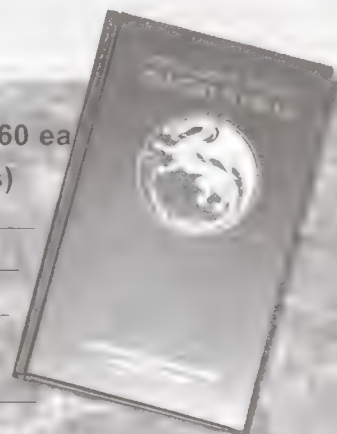
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The gurgle of water that rushed across the stones almost had a musical quality to Anwyn Baldomyre's ears. The young harper stopped at the edge of the swiftly flowing stream that danced down the rock face and formed a pool beneath the falls. Around him, the Lamborian forest was rich with autumn's earthy colors. A sign that perhaps he might want to consider ending his journey through this strange land and return to his own home. Winter was not a time he wanted to be on the road.

At the edge of the stream, Anwyn knelt and thrust one hand into the cold flow. The beauty of the landscape made him less cautious than was probably wise. But then, his magic harp Glynnanis had yet to warn him that there was any danger present. With a sigh, he cupped water in his hand and raised it to his lips. Sweet and cool, it slid down his throat to wash away his thirst. He was reaching for more when a faint glimmer of metal under the

surface caught his silver eyes.

"Will you look at that," Anwyn said. "Someone lost a cup."

"Where?" rang Glynnanis's musical voice in his head.

Anwyn pushed long strands of red hair out of his face and pointed in the general direction as he glanced at the harp. Glynnanis angled its unicorn head towards the water. There, in the deep pool, glittered a shape that did bear some resemblance to a goblet.

"Wonder how it got here," Anwyn said with a frown.

"Perhaps the owner fell in while trying to fetch himself a drink," Glynnanis suggested. "It's probably worth a good deal more silver pence than you've seen in your lifetime. I say, you should fetch it and take it to the nearest village to sell it."

Anwyn made a face. "But I'll have to get wet," he said.

"You're not wood," the harp insisted. "You won't warp. Besides, if you would make your sacrifice to become a true mage like Rhystar, you could magic it out with a

snap of your fingers."

Anwyn sighed. True enough. He did not possess the power to move objects at will because he refused to make the sacrifice that would free his full potential as a mage. And though his silver eyes marked him as one born to wield such power, he could do little more than sing the Songs of Power once a day, the very songs taught him by Rhystar of Far Reach who had also made the harp Glynnanis.

The pool was at least as deep as Anwyn's chest, and the thought of wading into such cold water lacked appeal, fortune or not. Still, his curiosity was getting the better of him, and there were other ways to claim it. He quickly slipped the harp's cerecloth sack and his satchel from his shoulder and kneeling on the bed of boulders that formed the shore around the pool, he thrust his staff into those depths. It took a bit of fishing about, and the current kept playing havoc with his intentions, but at last, he managed to

Cup of Songs

by Laura J. Underwood

catch the staff into the bowl of the goblet and carefully maneuver it close enough to pull back his sleeve and reach into the water to claim his prize.

The brass goblet was beautiful as he rolled it about in his hands. The rim had been decorated with a knotwork design and set around with four obsidian stones carved into small faces wearing sorrowful frowns. Their expressions seemed to shift slightly as he turned the cup. A trick of the light, perhaps. The workmanship was very detailed. He looked inside and discovered runes etched in a mystical pattern he could not fathom, though he was sure he had seen such marks in some of the books Rhystar of Far Reach had. Anwyn was forever pawing through the mage's books, for sometimes he found ancient ballads and poetry penned in the margins. Rhystar once admitted that in his youth he had a terrible habit of scribbling in all his books, largely due to a lack of palimpsest when he was a soldier.

"Can you tell what it says?" Anwyn asked, holding it out for the harp's inspection.

"Who cares," Glynnanis said. "Let's take it to the nearest village and sell it."

Anwyn wrapped the cup in one of his shirts and placed it into his satchel. "I never knew you were ruled by greed, Glynnanis," he teased.

"I'm merely being practical."

Anwyn sighed, rising to his feet and starting on. He felt certain that if he followed the stream, it would lead somewhere, and soon enough it brought him to a road that meandered along its path, then crossed it at a bridge where a wooden sign declared that the village of Loughlan was less than a quarter of a league on. Good, the harper thought. He would sleep in a bed tonight, and cheerfully he began to hum a merry ditty ...

... and paused when he realized he was hearing his song being echoed from the depths of his satchel.

"Glynnanis?"

"It wasn't me," the harp said.

There was definitely a brassy sound issuing from the depth of Anwyn's sack, and uncertain, he paused, reaching into the darkness to draw forth the source of the sound. The cup, muffled within his shirt, was echoing the song.

"Lords and Ladies," Anwyn muttered and unwrapped the goblet once more. The metal was warm in his hands, and the voice that rang from its bowl

reminded the harper of a brass bell. He stared at it, filled with wonder at the gentle sound. The obsidian faces looked more cheerful now. "Glynnanis, the cup can sing!"

"So it would seem," the harp said. "Let's get it to the village and ..."

"Why?" Anwyn said. "The cup's apparently magic, and I bet Rhystar would be delighted to have such an item. Let's see if I can teach it another song."

He began to sing a ballad about a merry maid and her lovelorn suitor, and immediately, the cup changed songs and began to echo his artistry.



Three different songs later, he was singing a duet with the delightful instrument.

"Anwyn, we have company," Glynnanis suddenly said.

Anwyn stopped singing to the cup and turned to find a man in a leather and wool cloak that looked quite suitable for hiding in the forest.

"Nice cup you got there," he said and flashed a malevolent smile. "Give it over, lad, and I'll let you keep your life."

Anwyn stepped back, only to hear the crunch of a boot on leaves. He turned with a gasp and found a second man was blocking his way, and a third was just coming out of a copse in the woods.

"I think now would be a good time to leave," Glynnanis said.

Anwyn heartily agreed. With a sigh, he sang the notes of his Gate Song, and

before the startled bandits had time to react, he slipped into a void that was cold and dark. He concentrated on a place back down the road, and found himself standing on the rutted surface alone ...

... at least until the cup began to repeat his Gate Song.

"No!" Anwyn cried, uncertain of what would happen. The darkness closed over him as before, and he struggled, trying to figure out where it was taking him in the airless void. Then there was road under his feet, and the angry curse of men arguing about which way he might have gone. He found himself standing right in the middle of the bandits again.

"By the Black Wind, he's back!" one of the bandits cried.

Having used his Gate Song for this day, Anwyn had no choice but to start running. He bolted into the trees, uncertain of where else to turn, when the cup began to sing again. Anwyn tripped over a root just as the darkness of the void folded over him again, and he found himself once more on the road where he had first gated himself to escape those men. He landed flat on his stomach. Fortunately, the harp sack was behind him, but Glynnanis banged painfully into his back.

"Quick!" Glynnanis cried. "Sing it another song!"

Anwyn struggled to his knees. The first song to cross his mind was an old nursery rhyme he had learned from his father, and he sang it haltingly, trying to catch his breath. But to his relief, the cup began to echo the new song wordlessly.

"By the Four," Anwyn said, looking at the cup. The obsidian faces now wore demonic grins that sent a chill through him. *What are you?* he thought, wondering if it knew his mind as well. No ordinary cup to be sure, especially to be able to sing his Songs of Power and work the spells over and over.

"Glynnanis, is it alive?" he asked.

"I'm beginning to wonder," the harp said. "The spells around it are too strong to look past."

No matter, Anwyn decided. The sooner he got rid of the cup, the better. He quickly wrapped it in enough layers to muffle its voice, and not a moment too soon, for he heard the thunder of feet coming down the road before him. Quickly, Anwyn threw himself into the forest, ducking down behind a large tree to wait. He only dared

to peer out when the sound faded, and he saw the last of the bandits rushing off around the next turn in the road.

"Lords and Ladies," he muttered under his breath, and struggled to his feet to find his way back on the road to Loughlan.

He kept his pace swift, crossing the bridge once more and following the road until, at last, the forest opened out to reveal farms and large wooden palisades with a timber gate house. The guard there looked Anwyn over, then motioned him past, and even told him where the local metalsmith could be found. Hopefully, the smith would be able to use the cup, and with luck, it would have forgotten Anwyn's magical songs.

But luck did not seem to be in his favor, he was quick to discover. Anwyn found the shop on the main thoroughfare easily enough. The metalsmith was repairing a silver ladle, and barely looked up as Anwyn entered the open front, which looked more like a stall to the harper than a building.

"Be with ye in a minute," the smith said. He was a tall man with merry blue eyes and a fair beard fading with age. He finished his hammering, then laid

the ladle aside and looked down at the harper with a smile. "Now, young stranger, what can I do for ye?"

"Well, sir," Anwyn said. "You wouldn't know anyone who would be interested in purchasing a fine goblet of well worked brass ..."

"How fine?" the metalsmith asked suspiciously.

"As wondrous as any a man of your skills has seen, I'm sure," Anwyn said. "I'll gladly part with it for a few brass tupins, though I'm sure it's worth far more ..."

"Let me see it," the smith said.

Eagerly, believing he was about to make a sale, Anwyn drew forth the cup and unwrapped it. Blessed silence filled the air, and Anwyn almost sighed in relief. But as soon as the cup was brought into the light and placed upon the table, it began to wordlessly hum that childhood lullaby.

"By the Black Wind of All Ill!" the smith cried and backed away. "Where did you find *that*?"

"Out in the forest, abandoned in a stream, with no sign of its former owner ..."

"Best you had left it abandoned, lad!" the smith said and bolted out of his

shop and into the street. "Guards!" he shouted at the top of his lungs.

"But, sir ..." Anwyn snatched up the goblet, following the man out into the street. "Sir, why do you flee?"

There was suddenly the thunder of boots on packed earth as men raced into the streets. And the echo of a horse's hooves began to fill the air as well.

"Guards, surround him!" a new voice barked.

Before Anwyn could say his own name, he was cut off from any hope of escape. Swords and crossbows glittered a circle around him. *And I've already used my Gate Song*, he mourned to himself. Beyond the lethal border of steel and wood, he spied a man dressed far better than the rest, mounted on a large grey horse that looked as though it could easily pull a wagon as be ridden. The rider cast his sharp green gaze down on the silver-eyed harper who pushed his red hair from his face in a nervous gesture.

"Just where did you get the Cup of Chaos, harper?"

Panic filled Anwyn's heart. Bad enough his silver eyes marked his potential for mage craft, even though he



had not made his sacrifice. But to be branded a thief was too frightening to contemplate, for they would likely cut off his hand.

"I swear to you, noble sir," Anwyn said. "I found it abandoned in a stream. It was just lying in the water. I did not steal it ..."

"Take it back," the man ordered sharply, "or I promise it will be the death of you!"

"I ... I don't understand ... it's only a cup ..."

"It is more than a cup," the man said. "It is the Cup of Chaos, created by the sorcerer Califyn of the Black Caverns and given to our master, Baron Hanlon, to bring Chaos into his household. For years, we have tried to get rid of it, and finally we were successful when that greedy foreign merchant came through and bought it for a song, but now, you have brought it back to plague us once more."

"I didn't know," Anwyn insisted.

"Didn't you bother reading the inscription under the base?"

Admittedly, Anwyn realized he had not looked under the cup when he examined it. Cautiously, he tipped it over and found the runes of Chaos etched there along with words in the common tongue.

"Let any man who fills this cup, pour out only chaos."

"But ... I haven't filled it with anything," Anwyn said, frowning.

"Except your magic songs," Glynnanis sang in a muted whisper, yet those words had the power to send a shiver through the harper as he realized what he had done.

His fingers suddenly went numb with fear, and he dropped the goblet to the ground. It bounced off the cobbles, ringing like a bell.

"Don't leave it there!" the man ordered. "If you truly value your life, pick it and put it back where you found it!"

Anwyn hesitated, unwilling to touch the cursed thing.

"I said, pick it up now!"

The hard words spurred Anwyn into obedience. He snatched the goblet off the ground by its stem, looking at it, horrified. It continued to sing that wretched nursery rhyme.

"Now, leave here, and don't look back!" the man said. "Or I will have my men loose their arrows into you."

The circle parted, leaving him no choice but to make for the gate. All eyes

were on him. Guards, villagers, farmers and merchants, women and children. They watched him as though he were the curse itself. He could do nothing but leave them behind, making once more for the road.

What must I do? he thought.

"Take it back and toss it into the stream where you found it," Glynnanis said mumpishly. *"And good riddance to bad fortune."*

Anwyn bit his tongue rather than remind the harp whose idea it had been to take the cup to the village to sell it. He headed back down the road, entering the forest again, moving swiftly for fear the villagers would change their minds and shoot him in the back on principle. His lungs heaved and he wanted to cry, but he kept the tears inside. Besides, the song the cup now repeatedly sang was starting to annoy him.

How far he had traveled, he could not say, but eventually he found the bridge that crossed the stream. There he stopped and debated tossing the cup into those swift rapids. No, he would take it back to the deep water pool in the woods. Better it be left off the road so no one else would find it.

He continued over the bridge, the weight of his burden making him weary and careless once more. He followed the road along the stream and was nearly at the place where it veered away into the woods, when he heard a familiar shout.

"There he is!"

Anwyn turned in time to see the bandits charging into the road.

"Give us the cup!" they shouted in unison.

"Gladly!" Anwyn cried and with a shout, he tossed it far into the woods and started to run on down the road.

Shouts of anger filled the air, though not directed at him. The men were battling over the cup and they retrieved it from the copse where it landed. *Let them pour their own chaos into it,* he thought.

But then, his musician's ears heard a shift in the sound the cup made. It abandoned the nursery rhyme, and once more began to sing the Gate Song.

No! Anwyn thought, stopping in his tracks.

There was a scream of pain, and he felt the flash and shift of currents in the air as a black void opened up before him and vomited forth the leader of the bandits. He was holding the cup to his

chest with both hands, and from its stem dangled a third, severed at the wrist.

Anwyn drew back in horror. The bandit fell to his knees, then saw what he held. With a cry against all magic and mages, he abandoned the cup right there on the road and scrambled to his feet. Anwyn heard the man retching as he disappeared from view.

"By the Four," the harper muttered in unease. "What have I done to deserve this!"

"Let's get this monstrosity back to the pool and be done with it," Glynnanis suggested.

Anwyn was inclined to agree. He used his staff to push the severed hand away, then, carefully, he lifted the cup, singing another song to keep it entertained. The cup immediately changed to match the melody Anwyn gave it, and rapidly, he thrust it into his satchel and raced for the deep wood once more.

It was easy enough to find the pool by following the stream. There, Anwyn sank to his knees and drew the cup from his satchel. The song was still the gentle one he had given it. With a sigh, he dipped the cup into the water and filled its bowl, then let it sink into the watery depths.

"Well, hopefully, that's that," Glynnanis said. *"What say we go back to the village and let them know all is well. I think it's going to rain, and I, for one, would like to be under a dry roof ..."*

Anwyn let the harp prattle, rising to his feet. He turned to leave when the air became sharp with magic once more.

"NO!" he cried as he felt the void open before him. The cup tumbled through and landed at his feet. "No!" he said, and picked it up, intending to pitch it back into the water.

But it started to sing the Gate Song once more, and with a yelp, he dropped it to keep from losing his own hand. The cup bounced, then disappeared only to reappear at his feet again.

This will never do. Why did he have to sing the Gate Song while the cup could hear him? Why did he have to draw it from the pool? He thought wearily of cursing the sorcerer who created it as, angrily, Anwyn realized the cup would keep returning to him no matter what, and he would be condemned to carry the chaotic thing. He picked it up and looked at the small obsidian stones. The faces still wore those demonic grins, as though mocking his efforts and his failures.

"Obsidian," he muttered.

"Stone born in fire," Glynnanis supplied.

"And will shatter like glass," Anwyn said.

Cautiously, he set the cup on the ground and seated himself before it. He closed his eyes and concentrated on finding the notes of his Song of Fire.

He only hoped it would have no time to repeat the Song before the magic fire did its work, and he sensed that trying to move to a safe range was a waste of time. The cup would merely follow. In spite of the risk, Anwyn let the Song of Fire dance through his thoughts, concentrating on the hottest flame he could invoke. The heat of the magic raced through him, sending rivulets of sweat coursing down his skin, but he did not dare hum it aloud. He let it burn in his blood until he thought he would faint from the heat.

Then, opening his mouth, he let the Song of Fire flow.

Flames as white as the heart of the sun engulfed the goblet where it sat. Anwyn heard it shriek as though alive, and when he opened his eyes, he saw forms writhing, small spirits in the stone, distorted creatures of chaos. They could not escape his flames as he sang, and though he felt the heat of his own fire lashing back at him, he would not let go of the Song of Fire, no matter how much it singed him. Flames whipped about and leaped on the thin limbs of autumn-hued trees as the Cup of Chaos continued to scream.

And only when the sound had died, and the entities had ceased to flourish, did Anwyn abandon his Song. He sank back, feeling the pain of heat's blistering on his own flesh. With a gasp, he called the Song of Rain, and let it put out his fire where it had caught the drying leaves, and then, though exhaustion threatened to take his awareness away, he managed to call his own Song of Healing to soothe the blisters on his skin and face.

And when, at last, he was able to open his eyes, he found no more than a lump of melted brass and broken stones where once the cup had stood. With a sigh, he took it in his hand and turned it over once to be certain nothing of its magic remained. Then he crawled to his feet, tossing the pitiful remains into the stream to wash chaos away, and started back for the road.



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LAURA J. UNDERWOOD has sold thirty-six short stories of fantastic fiction. Her work has been featured in numerous publications including *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*, *Pulp Eternity* and *Adventures of Sword & Sorcery*,

as well as several anthologies (**SWORD AND SORCERESS**, **CATFANTASTIC** and **SUCH A PRETTY FACE**).

JAMES BALKOVEK is a native Californian and a graduate of California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine

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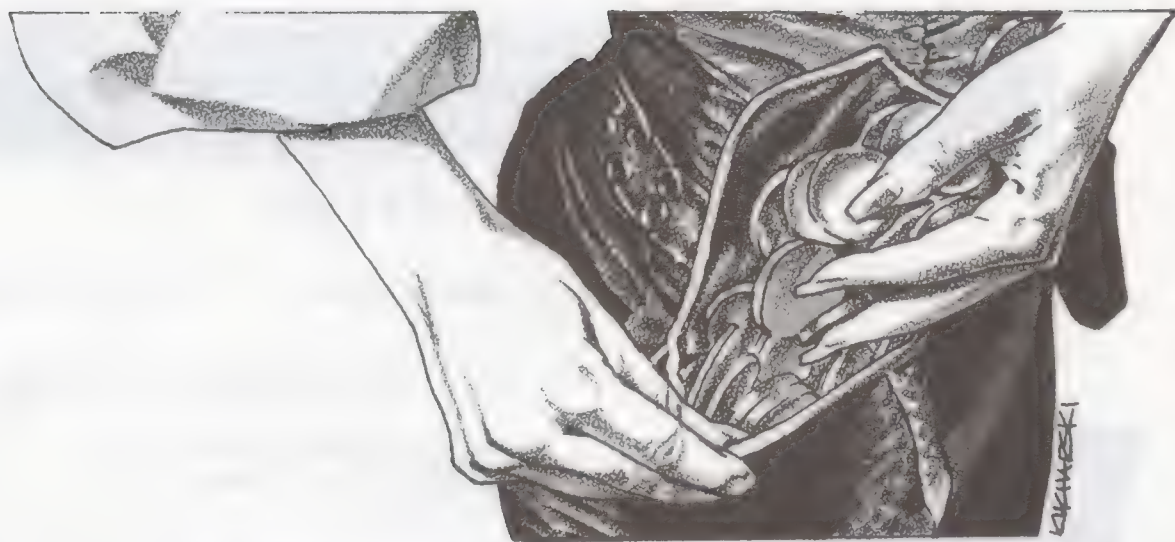
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If We Shadows Have Offended

by Emily C. A. Snyder

"Think on *this*," Miriam said as she sat heavily on the wicker stool and leaned conspiratorially against the table. Her red hair shone in the light of the brazier and the lanterns hanging from the ceiling. Her dark leathers creaked as she shifted her weight and said, "You are not the only one to have slain a petty wyvern, good sir, or to have staved off the occasional chimera, or manticore or whatnot. Every mercenary, every knight, every boy has some similar paltry tale to tell. But how many have ventured into the lands of Avallach and returned — before seven years — with the gold of the sidhe?"

Deep chuckles responded, echoing off the tavern's low ceiling from the men sitting around her. But the adventurer who sat across from her merely smiled, and raised one fair eyebrow. "Are you saying," this man replied at length, "that *you* have done such a thing? And, even supposing you speak the truth, that you would bandy about such a tale on this isle?"

"I have," Miriam nodded, draining her mug of ale and wiping her mouth with her sleeve, "and I do. Would you hear it?"

"For the standard fare," the man said, neatly arranging the frill that fell from his cuff.

"Aye, we could all do with a round of drink," another smiled, revealing two

holes where his front teeth should have been.

Miriam shrugged. "Well enough. And should you like my tale, you will all gladly recompense me, of course."

The gap-toothed man coughed but said nothing. The tavernkeeper obliged the customers with ale, and Miriam began.

"I did travel to Avallach, through the dense mists and over the still waters, with naught to aid me save my wits and my looks, and the songs I was taught long ago. I could not carry my sword with me, for the touch of iron is death to the fey, and my poniard would have surely been taken from me ere I could use it. But I wore this beneath my bodice." Miriam pulled out a small silver cross, at the heart of which was a blood-red garnet stone. Replacing it she continued, "A kiss won me passage by the old boatman to the shrouded island, and my voice gained me welcome to the sidhe court, where I posed as a jongleur, of sorts, come by mischance to that strange place. With my song I lulled the court to sleep one late night. And as they slumbered, I crept into the cavern where the sidhe guard their wealth. I was met only once as I was leaving the treasure-place, by some errant fey who tried to stay me, but the silver of my cross burnt his right hand,



and I was able to escape. I stole out like a shadow, like a fey, singing the song of sleep."

Miriam grinned, tilted her chair back and slapped the pouch that hung from her side. "This is the first telling of that

tale," she said. "What think you? Who shall be the first to fill my cup?"

Several of the men shifted hesitantly from one foot to the other, and one even made so bold as to take a step in her direction, but the fair man at the table stopped them all by raising his left hand. In a quiet voice he said, "Did you never think that you would be pursued? The beast I slayed, though you may think the deed was trivial, was covetous of the gold I took. How much more would the sidhe be?"

Miriam looked down at the wooden table, and absently traced a swirl of fallen ale

through his gloves. "Perhaps you will dream a better tale for when next you wish to drink."

Miriam watched silently as the tall man strode out the door in a swirl of sable and burgundy. The others, taking their cue from the adventurer, turned their backs on her. A moment later, Miriam felt the heavy hand of the

witchery? Indeed, you'll pay now from that purse of gold you've hid, or I'll keep what may be in your room, and your horse as well."

"Sir..." she said, twisting around to look up at him.

"Ah, you won't trick me by singing some sleeping song, little snippet." The tavernkeeper picked up the thin girl

over the grain with one callused finger. "It has been seven moons and more now, and no long-haired Hunters, no sharp-nosed Hounds have chased after me in all that time. They will have no remembrance of a red-haired jongleur except as a pleasant dream. Should they even miss the little I stole from their hoard, I believe they would look first for traitors from within, for the fey are a deceitful race, as all know."

"Ah, well, it may be as you say it is. Who is a mere adventurer to argue with a crafty and accomplished thief?" The man at the table rose, pulling on soft leather gloves. "But for myself, although I found your charming tale diverting, it does not suffice in the telling to pay for your inebriation." The man smiled suddenly, and patted Miriam on the shoulder with one hand. She shivered: his skin was cold even

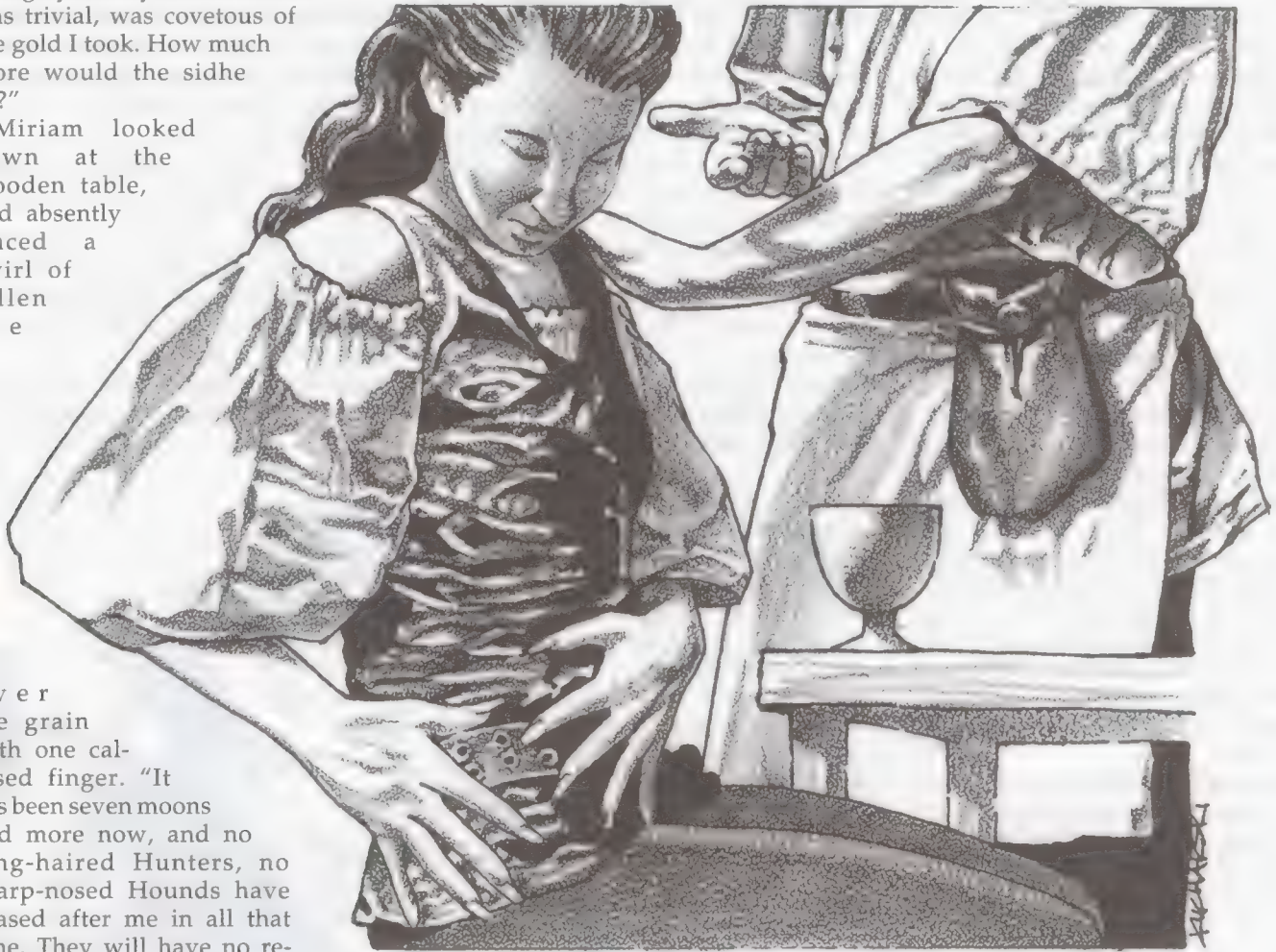
tavernkeeper on her shoulder, and heard the brisk demand for payment. Sighing, she reached for the pouch at her side...

...Only to find it missing. Astounded, she stared at her thigh as if by blinking enough times her purse would reappear. "It was here a moment ago," she said mostly to herself. "Perhaps I left it up in my room..."

Again she felt the thick weight of the tavernkeeper's hand pushing her back into her seat. "Do you think I'd trust a snippet like yourself what would sneak into Avallach to run up to the rooms and likely leave by some song or other

bodily, and carried her unceremoniously to the door. "You've done well enough tonight. Come back when you can pay for your fee in word or coin." With that he dumped her on the ground and swung the door shut.

Grumbling, Miriam picked herself up and dusted herself off. She squinted up towards the room that she had rented, and decided to wait until the night had fallen before climbing there to steal back her things. Miriam smiled. It would be good to bend her skill to thieving her belongings from the inept tavernkeeper, and from whichever drunken sot had taken her purse. After



all, what challenges were they to one so skilled as she?

The setting sun glimmered off one paned window, into her eyes, and Miriam turned quickly away.

Half blind, she stumbled towards the edge of the forest that lay beyond the tavern's front clearing. Her vision improved in the darkness of the woods, and it was with great relief that she rested on the stump of an oak. The sun danced on the horizon now; she would wait perhaps an hour more.

Time passed, and the moon rose to crest the tops of the evergreen trees. Miriam stretched her arms and rose to her feet, grateful for the thin blanket of clouds in the sky. She turned to where the tavern lights shone through the darkness of the forest, and grinned.

She had taken only a single step forward when she heard a soft voice behind her.

"I am sorry about your little bit of ill fortune earlier."

Miriam twirled around, her hand flying to her boot where she kept a silver poniard. Her eyes squinted, barely making out the figure of a man on a horse. A single light flared up, and Miriam quite clearly saw the bemused face of the fair, tall man garbed in sable and burgundy. She scowled. He ignored her and swept off his soft feathered cap to bow gracefully, his bound long hair falling over his ever so slightly pointed ears. Her purse hung jingling at his side.

Miriam sucked in her breath between her clenched teeth and then hissed, "Thieving sprite! Faerie kin!"

"Please." The man held up his hand, his wide smile and twinkling eyes belying the peaceful gesture. "I have a name."

"What should I care?" Miriam spat. "Stealing, devious pixie! I'll..." She lunged forward awkwardly, her foot twisting on a root, the poniard falling harmlessly to the ground. The fey caught her in his cold embrace.

"You have hurt yourself," he said. Carefully he lowered her back onto the stump, then knelt next to her. "With your leave...?" She nodded, muttering something about

mischievous elves.

Gently he touched her foot, turning it one way and then the other, feeling for broken bone. Miriam winced only a little. "You do realize that you very nearly succeeded?" he said in an infuriatingly conversational voice. "Indeed, I respect you for your brave attempt. And I am sure that if you were not so full of pride, you would not have failed at all. But, you see, Miriam, you should never have told your story."

Then with a snap, he twisted her ankle back into the correct position. Miriam stifled a scream as he did so, a bit of heroics that won her a sly smile from the man. "What else should I have known?" she asked, as he found a bit of bandaging from somewhere — Miriam thought it best not to ask — and began to bind the foot.

Oddly, the man hesitated before answering. Then, looking up he said, "We don't sleep."

"Oh." Miriam considered. "So you knew what I was doing and who I was." The man nodded. "Yet you let me go."

"We were restless. You were amusing. And I must say, I'm rather glad that I'm the one who found you." He flipped his long hair back from his face and grinned up at her.

Miriam found herself nearly smiling in return, but collected herself enough to

say, "Through subterfuge."

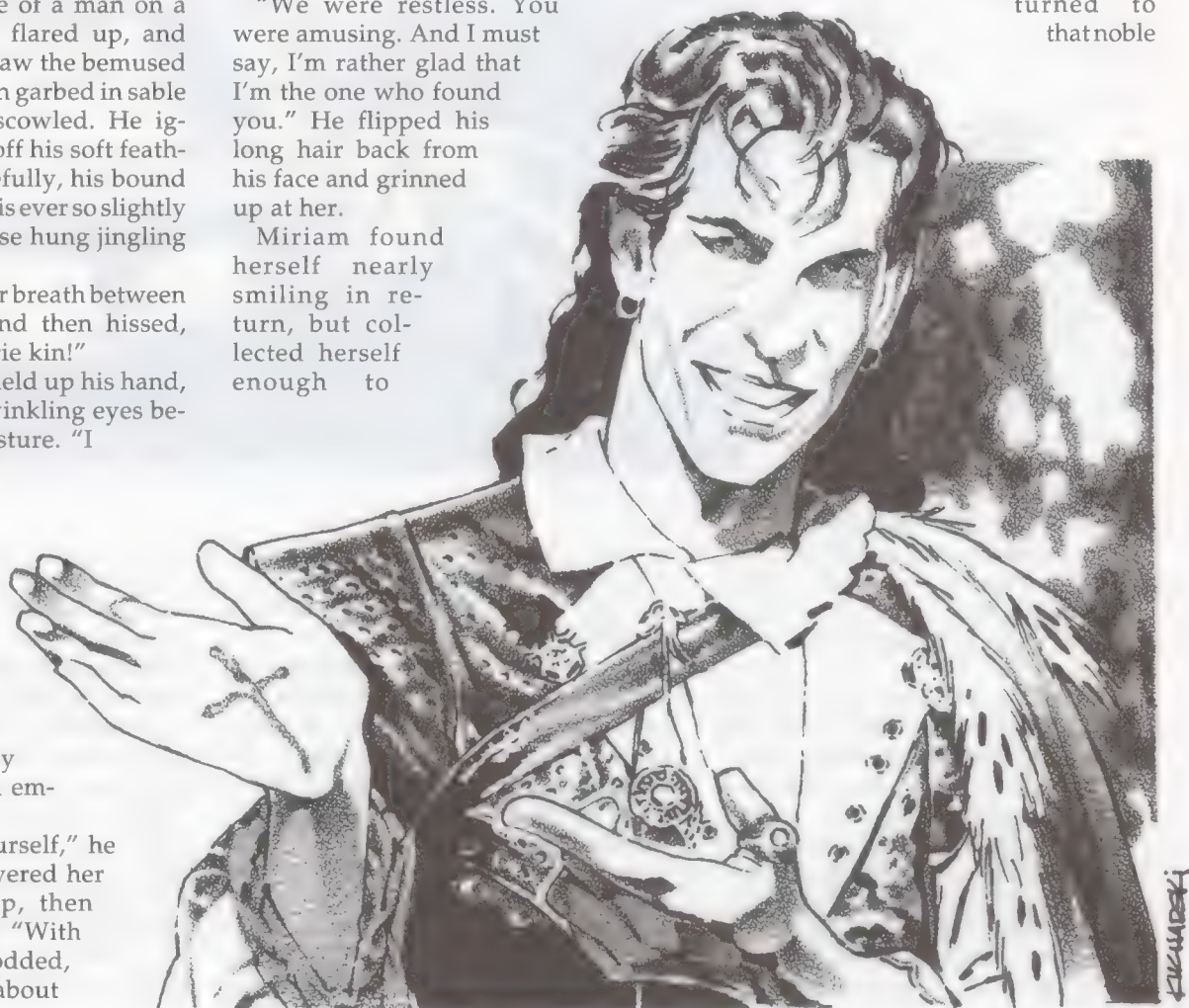
"Not at all, my lady!" he said, rising. "I have told nothing but the truth the whole evening!"

"An honest sidhe? You must be a rarity among your people." Miriam hoped her sarcasm would mask her growing sense of foolishness. How could she have been so blind not to mark the incongruity of this pale-faced adventurer? The sharp teeth and high cheekbones? It was all Miriam could do not to blush in anger and embarrassment. "I suppose," she continued, "that you actually killed that wyvern you boasted of."

"Several centuries ago, yes. Back when such paltry deeds, as you term them, were noteworthy."

"And you have since turned your hand to the noble profession of a cutpurse," Miriam said, dangling the loose ends of the severed cord which still hung by her side.

The man folded his arms and pursed his lips. One peaked eyebrow rose as if to ask who had turned to that noble



profession first? He said, however, "You do not believe me. Perhaps this will help." Pulling off one glove, he held out his right palm for her inspection. Miriam's whole body slumped as she clearly saw the silvery burn that her cross had left on his hand nearly a year ago. "I confess, it was this very disfiguration which helped me to find you, since the burn was drawn to that object which burnt it."

He pulled back on the glove reflectively, then turned and remounted his horse. Looking down at the tiny woman he said, "I am grateful to you, Miriam, and I do hope that you will forgive me for any inconveniences I may have caused you. Incidentally, you sang the Hydoemi song quite well. Most humans mangle it until it's barely fit to be a child's lullaby. Again, my thanks."

"I don't want your thanks," Miriam cried after him. The fey turned in his saddle to glance back at her and was surprised to see that she had pushed herself off the stump and was hobbling after him. She stopped just beside him, and held out one demanding hand. There was a fire in her eyes that the statuesque sidhe found very interesting. "Give me back my gold."

Quickly, before Miriam could pull away, the man bent down, took and kissed her outstretched fingers. His colorless eyes glittered. "Come to Avallach to reclaim it," he said, before kissing her fingers again and disappearing.

The world spun, the ground heaved and the very air seemed to ripple. Time bent backwards, reversed, then settled into a place an hour previous. The moon returned to a horizon beneath the trees, and the sun rose to glint off the tavern windows and into her eyes.

Miriam blinked as if awakening, bent down to pick up her fallen poniard, and slowly turned to face the sunset-burnished tavern, instead of the night-shadows of the woods. The door opened and the tavernkeeper came out, wiping his hands on the hem of his apron. "Here now, girl," he called to her, "are you coming in for the night, or did you want to sleep in the woods?"

Miriam shook her head and trailed after the big man inside and up the stairs to the room she had rented for the night, barely noting that she was no longer limping. "That tale you told," the tavernkeeper boomed over his shoulder, "one of the best I've heard. Not many would dare visit them, if you

know what I mean." Miriam was silent as she entered the room and began examining her things. "And look what yourself got out of it: that tall, fair man coming back and paying the whole bill like it were nothing to him. I bet it was the looks of you that drove him to do it," he added slyly. "I saw how he watched you, like you was a sidhe herself."

Miriam barely heard the garrulous man as she looked in her saddlebags and found them empty of the red gold they had been holding before. She noticed, though, that her purse was sitting on the window ledge. Eagerly, she snatched it and pulled open the cord. Inside, instead of the pure sidhe gold, there were silver and copper coins. Enough, Miriam noted, to travel to Avallach and reclaim what she had stolen and had been stolen from her. The fey's way of thanking her and making amends, no doubt.

"Do you think you'll ever go back?" the tavernkeeper asked, his rough voice interrupting Miriam's thoughts.

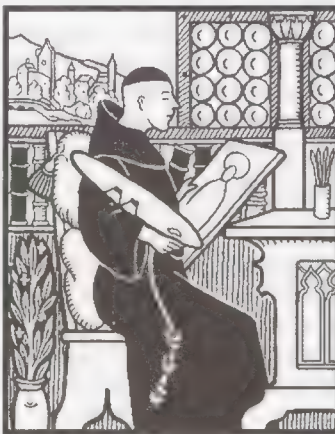
Miriam turned to him and smiled. Her dark eyes brightened and her blaze of hair swirled around her. "To Avallach?" she said, glancing only once at the open purse in her hands.

"Yes. Tomorrow."

✱

EMILY C. A. SNYDER, sometime resident of New England and New Jersey, is currently attending the Franciscan University of Steubenville, OH, where she studies Literature, Drama and Creative Writing (resultant of a tendency towards scholarly masochism). Her most recent escapades include a semester abroad in Gaming, Austria (frolicking with Sven the yodeling goatherd), organizing an annual Living Chess Match, performing various strange yet unusual roles in Anathan Theatre, and laughing in the face of "free time." She would like to dedicate this, her first professionally published work, to her parents, John and Christine Snyder, who introduced Emily to the world of beauty and imagination, and to God, her agent.

MICHAEL KUCHARSKI lives in Michigan where he works as an illustrator and graphic designer at the Detroit Historical Museum. He has been entering competitions and showing in galleries and art fairs since 1991, and he has been working as a professional illustrator since 1977. He has since worked for many book and magazine publishers and is a frequent winner of the Cauldron award for his work in *Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine*.



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THE LIBRARY

By Jon LaFalce

Katrella stood before the full length mirror and began weaving the threads of power as she had done so many times before. Adding sixty years to her appearance, and sixty pounds, would certainly do for her purposes. She sighed as her raven-colored hair grayed, her milky skin wrinkled and mottled, and her delicate frame expanded. She shuffled her way to the large ornate table in the center of the library, practicing a slight limp. The now elderly woman pulled open a drawer to retrieve a pair of comically thick eyeglasses which she carefully donned. Waving her hand, the bright light that permeated the shelf-lined cavern noticeably dimmed.

The reverberations Katrella had felt days before through the ceiling of the library had stopped as abruptly as they had begun. The perimeter walls of the castle must have fallen, or else the Prince would have returned the ancient books he had commanded for his battle wizards. The library lay too deep in the bowels of Mount Shema for her to hear any sounds of the mortal combat that raged above. Knowing the lightly fortified keep would not hold out for long, she awaited the arrival of the victor, whoever that may be.

Katrella settled into her favorite high back chair as she heard the hidden stone door slowly scrape open. She folded her hands into her lap as the portal at

the far end of the room opened far enough for an unfamiliar gauntlet to slide through the breach. A moment later, a large bastard sword poked through, used as a prybar to barely gain entry for a single individual.

A burly, bearded warrior about forty years of age wriggled through the fissure. The granite block slammed shut leaving the filthy, leather-armored soldier staring about the vast room. The man stood motionless as his eyes adjusted to the dusky light that illuminated the book-filled chamber. As soon as he saw the eightyish woman, his sword went on guard, and he cautiously advanced.

"Good evening," Katrella said in perfect Estarese. "Welcome to Castle Stonespine's library. You certainly are a long way from home." She gestured toward a blue ceramic pitcher sitting on the table. "Would you care for some refreshment?"

The gore-spattered warrior paused as if surprised the old woman could speak. He then rapidly moved across the room and placed the tip of his sword to Katrella's throat. "You are a witch!" he snapped with more than a touch of malice in his voice. The soldier looked directly at Katrella's magnified eyes but did not plunge the blade into her leathery neck. He could not see the blue and red sparks that momentarily flickered between Katrella's fingertips.

"I am a librarian," Katrella replied as evenly as she could. Adrenaline flowing, her concentration focused on detecting any change in pressure on her throat from the steel. She had been in this same situation half a dozen times over the past three hundred years and it never got any easier.

With his free hand, the warrior thrust forward a small glass orb that hung from a leather thong. The icy blue sphere glowed slightly and pulsated like a beating heart. "This place reeks of witchery! I should just kill you now."

"It is true this place is guarded by magic," Katrella said carefully. "And yes, there are many books of arcane lore here. But I myself am little more than a caretaker." She sat very still as the blade did not move from her throat.

"Then how do you know I'm from Estar?" the soldier snarled, his red hair poking out beneath an iron helm. "Particularly since the army carries the Kostoli standard?"

"Only the highest noble who rules this castle is able to find this place, much less enter it. How I know you speak Estarese is simple. Dartak Raachmal, former commander of the Estarese army, was recently stripped of his rank and banished, for reasons not completely clear. Further, it is common knowledge that the leader of the



Kostoli expeditionary army is traditionally a foreign-born warlord. Kostol now marches on Estar with Stonespine in between. My guess is you are Commander Raachmal. Your fame precedes you." Katrella lowered her voice to just above a whisper. "Your presence here also tells me that my Lord Prince Almore has been slain. Perhaps his son too?"

Raachmal lowered the blood-splattered sword tip from the old woman's throat. "He went to the Otherworlds shortly after dawn, dying a soldier's death. But I thank you, madam, for telling me of the son I didn't know he had." Raachmal glanced about the cavernous room before returning his glare to the woman. "How is it you speak Estarese? Your accent is

unfamiliar." The grizzled commander raised the blade swiftly back to Katrella's throat. "Witchery?"

Katrella shook her head slowly, silver ringlets in her hair jiggling softly. "I know many languages as keeper of this place. I would not be able to catalogue the books without being able to at least read their titles."

Raachmal glanced about the book-filled chamber. "You said there are books of magic here," Raachmal said barely controlling his disgust. "How many and where are they?"

"I have not counted. The books of lore are scattered amongst the others."

"That's all I need to know," Raachmal said, lowering his weapon. He grabbed Katrella by the arm with his other hand and rudely pulled her to her feet. "Let's

go."

"Wait," Katrella pleaded. "There's one book that we can not leave here."

"Move, old woman!" Raachmal thrust Katrella into the center of the room toward the door fissure. "Lead me out of this cursed place."

"I must take a book, a special book, with me," Katrella insisted. "If I leave it in this room unattended, it turns to dust."

"So what?" Raachmal said, again shoving the elderly woman toward the door. "Move!"

Katrella regained her balance and looked down to the floor as if she were a small child being scolded. "It is the oldest book in the library and rumored to contain the secret of eternal life. It is said to be the tome that allowed the

great wizard Zeebiac to live for nearly a thousand years. That is why I am bound to this room. If the book is ever out of the Librarian's presence, it is lost forever."

Raachmal eyed her carefully. "Show it to me. But know that you'll die if you try anything."

Katrella gave her best feeble smile. "What could I do against a warrior like you?" She led Raachmal to a bookshelf twice the size of a man on the other side of the library. Standing on her toes and reaching up slowly for Raachmal's benefit, her hand paused before a glossy red volume. "It is this one." As she prepared to grasp the thin tome, her wrist was slapped away hard by the flat of Raachmal's blade.

"I'll do that," Raachmal commanded. "You think I'm stupid? If there's a poisoned dagger behind that book, you've not long to live. You think I didn't notice that this book is the only one without writing on the spine? Now step back." He reached up but his hand paused just before he touched the book. "Or is it that you guessed I would insist on pulling out the book myself?" Raachmal sheathed his sword, drew a long dagger from his belt, and placed the point on Katrella's ribs. "You take the book out. Slowly."

Still rubbing her wrist, Katrella looked into the man's eyes for any sign of humanity. There was none. She removed the book from its place and held it out. "Here," she said simply.

Raachmal slid the knife back into his belt. He eyed Katrella for a moment and then snatched the book. He flipped through the pages from front to back. "What's this? Every page is blank." He dropped the book to the floor and grimaced. "Enough games. You'll be telling me everything I want to know soon enough. Let's go, hag." He reached out to jerk Katrella's arm again.

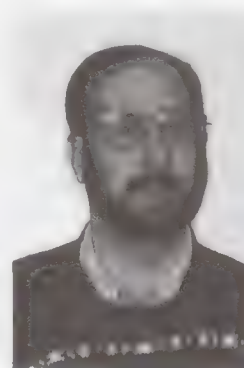
Raachmal's hand never grasped her. It was as if his muscles were suddenly failing as his movement dramatically slowed. His eyes widened as a glittering golden dust appeared in a swirl around him, moving ever faster. When he was finally obscured from view, the speed of the whirling powder decreased and the glimmer dulled, until only a small pile of the golden dust remained on top of the fallen volume.

Katrella smiled as she drew a glyph in the air, reverting back to her normal state. Taking off her glasses, she leaned down and picked up the book, gently wiping the remnants of the dust away. The drop to the floor had not damaged the book, but there was one notable difference. There on the spine, in gold lettering, was the name Dartak Raachmal.

Katrella looked up to the shelf that held several biographies of various evil men. She returned the book that now contained Raachmal to its place on the shelf, with all the other assassins, thieves, and bloodthirsty fools that had crossed her path. Then she walked to

her workbench, took an unmarked book cover out of a drawer, and began stitching blank pages onto the spine.

✱



JON LAFALCE writes: "A reformed computer geek, I am currently an anti-lock brake application engineer at an original equipment manufacturer. I travel extensively in this position

which gives me the opportunity to sate my voracious reading habits. I am happily married to a chiropractor and have a four-year-old son. I enjoy fishing and winter sports and have interests in pre-1920 aviation, medieval history, and college football. Having just hit 40, I have decided to try my hand at what I really want to do in life — write. I am currently working on another short story and a novel. My family and I are presently enduring the stresses of buying and selling a house and we are looking forward to doing something really important like selecting the right dog for a pet."

BRAD W. FOSTER has been drawing most of his life and has been lucky enough to have picked up five Hugo awards and a Chesley for some of that! Besides being easily amused by just about everything, he can be reached at: bwfooster@juno.com.

Results of the Cauldron

Stories:

- 1st Place: **"The Magic Fruit"**
by **Bob Hill**
- 2nd Place: **"Changeling"**
by **Anna M. Cherry**
- 3rd Place: **"The Lamp"**
by **Michael Don Anderson**

Artwork:

- 1st Place: **Katy Winters**
for **"A Quilter's Magic"**
- 2nd Place: **George Barr**
for **"White Violets"**
- 3rd Place: **Vincent Di Fate**
for **"Ploughman's Son"**

The Cauldron ballot is on page 64 - vote for your favorites. (A photocopy is okay if you don't want to cut up your copy of the magazine; please, only one ballot per reader.)



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A Brief Biography

by Rachel Holmen

Marion Zimmer Bradley:
June 3, 1930 - Sept. 25, 1999

She grew up poor, during the Depression, in upstate New York. Her father worked a farm *and* held a day job, but he still couldn't earn enough and was too proud to go on welfare, so Marion remembered being hungry. Still, they had books and whenever she wasn't in school or doing farm chores, she was reading. Saturday mornings, she would do the ironing and listen to opera, which became a lifelong passion — opera, not ironing. She played hooky from high school to spend days in the state library at Albany, and nobody had the heart to turn her in. She discovered science fiction fandom and it formed her adopted family for the rest of her life.

She started college near home, but without support from her alcoholic father, she was forced to drop out. Angrily, she told him she'd marry the first decent, sober man who asked her, and she did: Robert Alden Bradley, an older man from Texas. Brad was startled at how young she was; they had corresponded for several years but never met. After they married and had a son, David, Brad worried that Marion might be left a young widow and taught her to drive so that she could attend classes at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene, where she received a B.A. One of her required courses there was a Bible studies class which she said was, in retrospect, excellent training for a writer.

Even before she could form letters on paper herself, she was dictating stories that her mother wrote down, and in high school she wrote the first draft of the novel that was to become **THE FOREST HOUSE**, based on a libretto she'd read of the opera *Norma*. She sold short stories to the true confessions magazines and any other pulp market that would pay, then graduated to novels. Her son David asked later why she and his father had stayed married for so long, when they were so obviously incompatible; she replied, "He knew he could trust me with his money and we never ran out of things to talk about." And their conversations led to better novels that sold easily to publishers.

She met Walter Breen at a convention and was captivated. Brad didn't want to give her a divorce but she was persistent, so they agreed to part. The Breens lived in Berkeley for a time, moved back to New York, returned to California again. They had a son, Patrick, and a daughter, Moira Evelyn Dorothy, named after Marion's mother and after her closest friend in Albany fandom. Marion started graduate school at UC Berkeley in 1965, but never completed her Master's, due to Walter's nervous breakdown.

She was a morning person. While the kids were in school, she'd get up at 5 a.m., just as she had on the farm, and work at her typewriter on the current novel. Then she'd wake her children and get them ready for school, then plot out the next section of the novel over the breakfast dishes. When I came to work for her in 1991, I rarely saw her because I'm an afternoon person, but I think our slow acquaintance actually improved our working relationship; I can't remember one actual argument.

Remembering her own difficult college years, she took into her household a long succession of young people and encouraged them to take advantage of Berkeley's atmosphere of learning. She lent money to friends and paid her employees generously. Debbie Notkin of *Other Change of Hobbit* bookstore once told me, "I can't think of anyone who's done more good than Marion has, for more people."

She collected circus lore for years and eventually wrote a novel about trapeze artists, based on the kind of adopted family that she'd found in fandom, called **THE CATCH TRAP**. Its gay love story theme was controversial and has prevented it from being filmed, but the book has, in its way, almost as enthusiastic a following as **MISTS OF AVALON** does among women and Arthurians. She admired Mary Renault's works about Greece and wrote her own novel of the Trojan War, **THE FIREBRAND**.

One of her hopes, while writing **MISTS**, was to encourage Christians to value the contributions of women to religion. When **MISTS** went platinum, she was pleased but totally astonished; some of her Darkover novels had been as good, she thought. With the money, she bought gifts for her children, remodeled her kitchen, and bought her first new car. In later years, her accountant often asked in exasperation why she persisted in running her *FANTASY Magazine* when it consistently lost money. "I can only wear one fur coat at a time," she'd reply — though as far as I knew, she didn't even *own* a fur; she was just making a point. The magazine, and the market she could provide to young writers, was more important to her than any amount of cash.

She and Walter separated in 1979 but continued to have almost daily contact. His arrest in 1989 on child-molesting charges left her feeling stunned and betrayed; she finally realized that the old rumors about him had probably been true. She had a stroke less than a month later (though it wasn't her first, which occurred in 1987), and a heart attack six months after that; other strokes and heart trouble followed. After Walter died, she continued to mourn the charming, affectionate man he'd been when she first married him.

The strokes, plus the ongoing difficulties caused by diabetes and congestive heart failure, robbed her of a great deal, but she continued to work as a writer and editor literally up to the day of her final heart attack — that morning, she had dictated the magazine editorial into my pocket tape recorder, and then she went back to reading manuscripts for **SWORD & SORCERESS**. She was disappointed that her ill-health prevented her from any trips that involved flying, but she was able to take two west-coast cruises which she enjoyed tremendously, partly for the scenery and partly for the lavish buffet meals. She took great pleasure in her grandchildren; she had hoped to "catch up" to Diana Paxson's three.

She died at Alta Bates Hospital a few days after suffering a fatal heart attack, and is survived by her sons David Bradley and Patrick Breen, her daughter Moira Stern, and two grandchildren. *

Marion Zimmer Bradley • BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Marion Zimmer Bradley's *FANTASY Magazine*
Summer 1988 to present

LETTERS

Renee Bennett, Calgary, AB, Canada

I must say that I really liked the artwork for my story in issue #43, and I must thank Rachel Holmen for her kind words in The Last Word article.

Coming in second in the Cauldron Award certainly put a shine on my day. Thank you and all your readers for making it possible.

Renee, you're very welcome. — reh



Jessica, from the Internet

I am an aspiring writer ... kind of. I just finished reading your "Grammar Pet Peeves", and I truly think you should get in touch with my eighth grade language teacher! I think you two would get along just fine. Anyway, I think you should add the mistakes people commonly make when using "us" and "we".

I think we have run "grammar commentary" into the ground as an editorial topic for the moment at least, though good grammar will never cease to be important to clear communication. But thanks for the suggestion anyway. — reh



Sara, from the Internet

I have your magazine and love the art work in it. I was wondering if you could send me copies of a few pictures. I don't want to cut up the books so ...

By the way I only have issues 44, 43, and 42, so only art work from them. Please write back whether you send them to me or not. Thank you.

We're glad to hear that you like the magazine and the artwork. Rachel Holmen, who chooses the art, works very hard to get good art and to maintain good relationships with the artist who sell the rights to their work to us.

We have permission from the artists to print their work in the magazine, but that's all we're allowed to do. The right to sell copies of their art outside of the magazine belongs to them; if we made extra copies of their pictures we'd be stealing from them.

If you want to contact any of the artists, we will forward mail to them. Just send it to {artist name}, c/o Marion Zimmer Bradley's FANTASY Magazine, PO Box 249, Berkeley, CA 94701-0249.

— Elisabeth Waters, Secretary to Mrs. Bradley



John C. Mead, Tucson, AZ

A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

What is the sense of wonder?
What are we looking for?
Why seek the sunrise
On alien horizons
And hate the ground beneath our feet?

In the deeps of vacuous space
In fields of far faerie
Would we be other than ourselves?

Those wrapped in themselves
Write first novels that are thinly disguised
autobiographies

But I've never been a robot
And I never was a hobbit
And I've never been to Mars.

Myth without religion
The noncommittedness of secondary belief
The willing suspension of disesteem
The housewife who wants to build worlds
Rather than bake cookies

What are we looking for?
Good writing?
Not always.

Give me spell opera
Over space opera
Over soap opera
Over horse opera
Over Pavarotti
Over delicately delicious décolletage
Any day.

My genre is better than your genre!
Tell me once
Tell me twice
Tell me three times
What fools these mortals be!

Often the worst writers
Are the most fun
Of course, it wouldn't do
To mention any names.

As we say on the internet, "LOL!" Delightful. — reh



Barbara Tarbox, Hamburg, NY

On January 7, 1999, you sent me a rejection letter for a story titled "Question Four", in which you said that the story, though well-written, didn't have an ending. Using your explanation, I tackled the non-ending, re-wrote the final two pages several times and sent the revised version to the *Writer's Digest* 1999 competition. My November issue arrived today, and "Question Four" was listed in the top ten (fourth) in the Genre category. I was surprised, I was happy, and I just had to say "Thank You!"

You're very welcome, Barbara. — reh



Robert A. Alpi, Jr., Lexington, KY

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read my short story "The Bonds of Brotherhood". Especially, I appreciate that you took the time to communicate your feelings about my work. In doing so, you have provided me with the opportunity to know what areas I need to improve upon.

Once again, thank you. And if I may be so bold as to add, remember my name, I will be back.

We're looking forward to it! — the staff



J. Culver Mead, Tucson, AZ

I was struck by your comments on "derivative works" in Rachel Holmen's "Last Word" column in issue #41. Are

Terry Brooks' works considered derivative works? Tolkien's characters and settings have been used by Mark Arvid White in "Olly Boffin and the Pocket Locket" published by the American Tolkien Society in the *Minas Tirith Evening Star*. Contributors to this journal are not paid; does this make some legal difference?

There is a series of gaming materials published by Iron Crown Enterprises (the reference is to the Iron Crown of Morgoth) set in Tolkien's universe. Many of the gaming scenarios resemble short works of fiction. I do not have any of these materials at present; as I recall they were copyright to Iron Crown Enterprises, without any notice of permission from the Tolkien estate. Can you refer me to anything which explores these issues in detail? Perhaps something from SFWA? Would you comment on this issue in the letters column?

In reference to the use of Tolkien's characters by Mark Arvid White as noted above, yes, this is copyright infringement, and the fact that contributors to the Minas Tirith Evening Star are unpaid makes no difference. The right to prepare a derivative work rests with the copyright holder. The website www.loc.gov explores these issues further. — Elisabeth Waters

I'd like to think that the Tolkien Society has permission from the Tolkien estate for its publication of derivative stories, but it would sure be nice if they would tell us they have permission. Otherwise, we have to assume the worst. — reh



Condolences on Marion's Death

The following are only a very few of the hundreds of condolence letters and emails which we received, and are still receiving, from Marion Bradley's fans and colleagues around the globe. On behalf of all the staff and of Marion's household and family, thank you all for your kindness. — reh

Niko Maljuzic, San Francisco, CA

Books are like angels, I think. They go out from authors and do they know not what. They're creations that their creators give up the control of and they do unintended works in their readers.

Marion Zimmer Bradley's books made me comfortable in my tradition, with my people. I remember Kennard blessing the *chieri* in the first book I read by her (**STAR OF DANGER**): "You are blessed. And blessed was Hastur and Cassilda whom he met by the wells of Renel."

Amazingly, she caught the way extended Mediterranean families work in **THE CATCH TRAP**. The chess game between Papa Tony and Tommy perfectly caught how we would have dealt with this: "This is your King. You must never lose your King." Indirect, loving, intense.

She understood men — our violence & how it can be channeled to positive works and even into love. Arthur's killing of the King deer and his subsequent sexual initiation saw right into our hearts and she never sought to geld us or make us "pet broke". She blessed our wildness.

Robyn Patricia Bennett, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

My condolences to you all on your loss. I read the web page the day after, but couldn't decide how to put feelings into words. I re-read most of the Darkover books and thought I would "take a page" from Mrs. Bradley's writings (**THE FORBIDDEN TOWER**, 1977, p. 296, to be exact).

"Mrs. Bradley gave many new writers a chance to feel the exhilaration of receiving, first a postcard indicating that their story was being held for possible publication, then a contract, a sign indicating that they now belonged to an elite group of people: published authors in the fantasy field. To be accepted by one of the most demanding editors in fantasy is a thrill that none of us who have been there will ever forget. Let that memory lighten grief."

I also read through most of her "commentaries" that preceded the stories in her anthologies. She indicated the influence Tolkien had on her, so I re-read most of J. R. R. Tolkien's **SILMARILLION** and came up with the enclosed poem. I hope you like it.

I chose to mail this down instead of using the form on the web site because I know Mrs. Bradley would have preferred hard copy over computer. Again, my condolences, my thoughts and prayers are with you all. Mrs. Bradley will be sadly missed by everyone.

Marion's Journey

Chorus:

She has led us on a journey,
Into sci-fi and fantasy,
From Darkover to Avalon,
And back again in time for tea.

1. A life is but many journeys,
On a bent Path that no one sees,
A Road that goes forever on,
Until the Straight Path, one step frees.

2. Now she walks where the Straight Path leads,
Beyond the call of this world's needs,
Her Road goes ever ever on,
While we treasure her written deeds.

3. For now she walks where no one sees,
A Path lined with flowers and trees,
That bloom with beauty far beyond,
Those that dance in the earthly breeze.

4. For now she walks where no one hears
But her, the music of the spheres,
She listens to the heavenly tones,
That speak of laughter, not of tears.

5. Marion's on a journey,
On the Straight Road beyond the sea,
Her memory continues on,
As part of Life's rich tapestry.

Clearly, somebody needs to set this to music. Thank you. — reh



Rosemary Edghill

I am very daunted by this news. I feel so privileged to have gotten to meet Marion last summer.

I will miss Marion Zimmer Bradley. We worked together on the Ghostlight series for several years, and during that time my own writing flowered under the challenge. She instinctively knew the best way to get the best work out of a writer. For some it was praise; for others, challenge. For years I tried to write a story that would be both good and

violate the guidelines of MZBFM so thoroughly that she would reject it. I never succeeded: she bought the good stories, rejected the bad ones, and always raised the bar.

Marion has been an important writer for about as long as I've been reading sf, but she was never a distant unapproachable colossus. It was more as if she were a glamorous and exotic cousin whose adventures were somehow ours to share. She was fun, her books were fun, and her worlds were places of high adventure. She opened so many doors for so many of us, both writers and readers. The world is a little colder now that she has left us.

— Rosemary Edghill



Robin Wayne Bailey

Dear Friends and Colleagues: I am quite saddened to hear of Marion's passing. She was an influential mentor who, as with so many young writers, encouraged my early work. Through the years, she purchased a number of my stories for her anthologies and magazines, and I was always pleased to publish with her. I know this is a time of grief for all of you. I wish all of you peace. Sincerely, Robin Wayne Bailey



Rodrigo Barbosa, Brazil

I don't know if you remember me. I'm Rodrigo Barbosa, that guy from Brazil who holds the darkover.org internet domain. Well, I was on a business trip, and only got the news today. I don't know what to say. I'm really saddened. I don't even know if I'm being able to write anything readable in English. People here at work are asking if someone in my family died. I really feel like that. One of the people I admired the most is now gone away from us. Sf will never be the same. Not since the death of Frank Herbert has sf taken a blow this big. I think I speak for all of us, Mrs. Bradley's fans, when we say we will hold her dear in our hearts for the rest of our lives. She tough (past tense of teach, I hope) us much. In my case, she taught me a great deal about being human, about never quitting. Also, I would like to establish a permanent Internet memorial for her and her work, and would like to know if Ms. Waters and the magazine staff would like to join me on this. If you wish, just drop me an e-mail.

With a tearful heart, Rodrigo Barbosa/
rodrigob@darkover.org

One of Rodrigo's original sentences was, "She tough (past tense of teach, I hope) us much." Rodrigo, my dictionary says "tough" means "unyielding in adverse circumstances" [American Heritage Dictionary]. Well, if any one word described Marion, "tough" was it. She worked until the day of her final heart attack, and rarely complained about the limits that ill-health placed upon her. The magazine's website, www.mzbfm.com, has photos and text from her funeral, and we'd be honored to have your website serve as a memorial as well. — reh



Jerry Pournelle

I first met Marion in Chicago in 1962. We were never particularly close but I certainly respected her. One should speak only good of the dead, but I have never had anything but good to say of her anyway. Eternal rest grant her, O Lord, and let light perpetual shine upon her.

— Jerry Pournelle

C.J. Cherryh

Marion is part of one of my first and warmest memories in the community...a night we both sat out the Hugo Awards in KC, in the coffee shop, neither of us having brought formal attire. She was kind to a newcomer.

— C.J. Cherryh



Swetlana Kabus, Germany

I feel with you. I love her books. Thank all gods, that we had her.

Yours truly, Swetlana Kabus (from Germany)



Susan Bound, Tennessee

Sunday evening [Sept. 26, 1999] at 10:30 PM EST, Cynthia McQuillin called me and confirmed MZB's death on Saturday evening about 6pm California time. Marion had a massive heart attack Tuesday evening while watching her favorite TV show, *Law & Order*. Raul initiated CPR and called the paramedics, who transported her to Alta Bates Hospital, just a few blocks from the house. All of Marion's extended family who could do so visited her in the time between Tuesday evening and Saturday evening when she died. Marion's last two weeks were good ones, with special meals, visits from friends, and the work on both S&S and the magazine. She went out on short excursions several times during that period.

I assure you that Marion read every thing that was submitted to her, and chose just what would be published. I spent two marvelous weeks with her during the later part of May, and she read manuscripts every day during my stay. According to Cindy, the magazine will continue until all the stories currently purchased can be published. This was Marion's wish.

Marion will have a funeral some time in October. At her request, she is to be cremated, and her ashes scattered in England, on Glastonbury Tor.

I talked to Marion about the Renunciates, and Darkover in general. She said she patterned the Renunciate training on Kung Fu, something for us to think about. She also had an abiding hate for horses, and felt that the modern equivalent was learning to drive and caring for an automobile. She had written a new Darkover, called **SHADOW KING**, which I read in manuscript one night when she was ill, and needed watching.

Marion gave us all so much. Most of the younger writers made their first sale to Marion, including Elizabeth Moon, Mercedes Lackey, Jennifer Roberson, Deborah Wheeler, and others.

Marion's family worked very hard to try and make life as pleasant as possible for her. They are to be commended for their loving care. Raul gave Marion several years of his life, tending her as lovingly as he would a mother, and indeed she thought of him as a son. Lisa, of course, was there, managing the literary end of things as well as family and personal matters. Cindy provided marvelous meals, and much conversation and listening. Rachel, who is the editor of the magazine, started with the attitude of, "It's a job," and came to love her boss. Ann Sharp, who edited the *DNL*, also was involved in day-to-day running of things. Diana Paxson was a great spirit lifter. She and Marion shared so much over the years. The first SCA tourney was held in Diana's yard. Dr.

Jane was always there, and Marion loved her.

Marion missed her mother and her brother Paul. She reminisced a lot about Walter and Brad (her first husband). She enjoyed a concert for her birthday by Moira, and a long visit with her grandchildren. Moira has two little boys. As much as we will miss Marion, her life these last several years was restricted due to her ill health. I like to think of her at a great convention in some heavenly place, giving Walter what-for and generally enjoying visiting with all her friends.

The family is notifying all the people like Misty who meant so much to Marion. Andre Norton will be called today, and we will see her this Friday. (She lives just 2 hours from here, and is my housemate's long-standing friend.)

Please pray for Marion's family during this difficult time. They have given so much of themselves for her; now it's time for us to give them a little. Without their loving care, Marion would have been gone a long time ago.

I plan on being at Darkover to see every one.

— Susan n'ha Myrtle/Susie Bound



In particular, the Darkover listserve on the internet contained many lovingly-expressed remembrances. Here are a few of them:

It's 7:30 on monday morning and I sit at my desk at work with tears in my eyes, shed for someone I never met but who nevertheless had great influence on my personal development. Marion's books helped me to understand and respect myself as much as people who are different, helped me even to find my very own religious understanding, led me to the belief that if more people would understand religion her way, earth would be a so much more peaceful place. As is Darkover these days. We'll never know whether she knew about what we do on our list but I truly hope she passed away knowing there are poeple who cherish her memory and will keep her and our homeworld alive.

Let these memories lighten grief and may Avarra take her in.

— Marjorie Ridenow-Tyall y MacAran/Christiane Heuser



I sit here at my computer, with tears in my eyes, at 3 in the morning, thinking of how a woman I never met could have me in tears. Then I remember that not only has she given me a world to escape to, but she was a founding mother of a society that represents a time I dream of, the middle ages. She was at the fateful summer party which has spawned a world-wide society dedicated to reliving all the good things of the Renaissance and middle ages. I even chose my SCA name after a character in one of her books: Eduin, a guardsman of Dom Esteban Alton. She will be sorely missed by all who know of her.

Let these memories lighten grief.

— Ron/Eduin Alton



I can't believe she's really gone.

—Nina /Catinina n'ha Susana



There is no need for grief. Marion has passed into the Overworld and is communing with Asimov, Heinlein, Zelazny and the other greats of sf/fantasy. One thing about

writers: they never really die as long as their books still exist.

— Jim



I met Marion Zimmer Bradley in the summer of 1984, when she signed my copy of **THE MISTS OF AVALON** in Salt Lake City, Utah. She was tiny and gruff, dressed in gray with short-cropped hair. Anne McCaffrey was there as well; Constanza and I were the only ones in line for Marion. That same summer, I discovered Starhawk's "Spiral Dance", and the two books together kicked the underpinnings out from under my worldview.

I wrote to her about it. She very kindly responded, in a long letter which in sum said this: Find out who you are, and then fight for that person with everything you have. Don't worry about finding a place to belong: it may not exist. If necessary, make your own and others will flock to it. For a while, I received the newsletters published by the Darkmoon Circle: while Marion may not have identified with the word "witch", the idea of women as equal before the Divine, especially in the practice of religious liturgy, was one that came across clearly.

From what I've read, she could be a right bitch when the mood seized her. She couldn't understand why anyone would want to RPG in another's universe when they could be inventing their own. She had no patience with the feminist concept of inescapable gender-role programming, and had been known to call those who made this assertion liars to their faces.

But she did give us a place to play, and to explore our own perceptions of what it means to be human.

As inherently strange as she found it that women would want to swear the Oath of the Renunciates in real life, many of us found the notion of the right to decide our own lives a revelation, and a very hard ideal to implement. I'm not there yet, but I'm trying. And I've found other women making the same effort, women I care for greatly. I never could have met them if not for the world she created.

May she find peace, in whatever world she has sought. May our memories, shared here and elsewhere, lighten grief.

— Amelia Parker / Amalie n'ha Constanza



Grey mists swirled around her ankles as the woman moved slowly towards a shining white tower. Though she had never walked these paths, she was not afraid for she had travelled here in her thoughts many times and knew each step of the way by heart. It was odd; the pain had been with her for so long, she felt too light without it. Up ahead, the soft strumming of a lyre-like instrument floated from a window that glowed a warm welcome. As she approached the steps, the massive bound doors opened to reveal the figure of a woman. Her beauty was beyond mere words. Throwing the door wide, she gestured inside. Behind her stood another woman, this one as dark as the first was fair. And beyond her many others. Some with blazing red hair, others pale and willowy. They all welcomed the woman with open arms.

"Come inside, Mother," smiled Avarra.

"We have been awaiting you..."

:''''''''(

— Cherillys



L'Autre Margot

by Jonathan Fesmire

Ken smiled and leaned down, kissing his wife, Margot, on the cheek. "*Bonsoir, ma chère,*" he said.

"Non," she answered. She shook her finger and strode into the house with Ken's daughter Julie clinging to her hip. "I will take just a minute," she said in French. "I'm going to the park with Julie while there is still light out. Margot is coming in the front door so she can check the mail."

Ken frowned. "Again," he muttered. It was not his wife, but her doppelganger, Linda.

When he heard the front door open, he went to meet Margot. She stood beside the couch, sorting through letters. Her black hair hung down at the sides of her face like wings.

"*Salut, mon chou,*" she said. She dropped the envelopes on the couch, then wrapped her arms around Ken's neck. "Linda is taking Julie to the park, so we have some time alone." Her lips pressed against the stubble on his cheek.

Ken tilted his head. "Why are you doing this to her?"

"To whom?"

"Linda. Why do you keep forming her and having her do all of your chores? Don't you want to spend time with Julie?"

Margot backed away. With a slow sigh, she sat on the arm of the couch. "I get some time with Julie. Listen, if you could create a duplicate of yourself,

then bring him back into you when needed, you would."

Ken shook his head. "I don't know."

"You would. I've been bringing her forth since the *lycée*, and it's fine. She does well. She's not really a person, Ken. She's just part of me."

When Ken heard footsteps in the kitchen behind him, he realized that he and Margot had spoken in normal tones. Linda had surely heard them.

"All right," Linda said, entering the room with Julie in her arms and a blue carry sack hanging on her shoulder. Despite Linda's smile, her wide eyes and tense cheeks revealed her hurt feelings. "I will be back in a little over an hour. Have fun."

She walked toward the back door, her black hair bouncing like Margot's, her figure as provocative. While Ken watched her move, he felt a glow spread from his heart to his cheeks. He turned back to his wife and kissed her, pressing his palm to the small of her back.

"That's better," she said, and the door closed.

Linda and Julie arrived home an hour and a half later, both sporting ruddy cheeks and grass stains. Margot stood in the kitchen, where she had just started frying crêpes, and Ken looked up from his drawing at the table.

"Well, we're home," Linda said.

"Julie, tell Papa about what we did at the park, all right?"

Julie began to nod as Linda set her down, and the child dashed to her father's chair, her black hair bouncing. "Up!" she said.

"What did you do? Did you play on the swings?" Ken asked, leaning toward his daughter's grinning face.

"Are you ready, Linda?" Margot asked. Ken gazed at the women as his daughter began to speak.

"Can I wait?" Linda asked.

Margot frowned, and glanced toward Ken.

"Julie," Ken whispered, "tell me in a minute, all right?"

"Well," Margot said, "we're about to eat dinner, and there's just enough for two. If I take you in you won't need to eat, so —"

"Fine," Linda said with a sigh. Ken recognized the clipped tone. Linda accepted the reintegration for the moment, but she barely hid her resentment.

Not really a person? Ken thought. She certainly showed free will, like a real person. Ken closed his eyes. Today, for using Linda, he and Margot shared the guilt.

With a stare a mother might give a disobedient child, Margot held her hands, palms down, toward Linda. The double turned her palms up and touched Margot's fingers. Frowning, she closed her eyes. Ken wanted to look away, but the sight always held his attention.



Linda's body widened, not as though she became bloated, but as though the essence of her body thinned and began to drift into the kitchen air. In a moment, Ken saw through her, saw the magnet-covered refrigerator, the door to his bedroom, and the open window. Her body puffed like smoke, drifting through her jacket, blouse, and jeans as Margot's hands absorbed it.

Linda's clothes fell on the kitchen floor.

"Bye-bye, Linda," Julie said, waving.

Ken patted his daughter's black hair.

When Ken awoke the next morning, the sun broke through the blinds to shine directly on his wife's pillow. Margot stood a few feet away from her side of the bed, dressed in a blue skirt and black vest. She gazed into the mirror, brushing her hair. Ken closed his eyes with his weariness.

A minute later, he looked again. Margot had turned to the side. She held out her hands.

Ken sighed as smoke flowed from Margot's palms. *Poor Linda*, he thought, but he stopped himself. Perhaps Margot knew what she was doing. Still, Linda's summoning made his heart pound and his hands shake until he clenched them and told himself to stay calm.

The smoke thickened, taking shape as the color of flesh formed upon it. In moments, Linda's body solidified. She stood naked before Margot, her hair and makeup identical to those of her maker.

"*Bonjour*, Margot," Linda said, covering her breasts. As she turned toward the dresser, Ken closed his eyes.

"Are you ready to take care of Julie today?" asked Margot.

"*Oui*. I love taking care of her, you know that. I think I will go out with her as well."

"*Bon. A tout à l'heure*," Margot said. Her footsteps clicked along the kitchen floor. A moment later, Ken heard the back door shut, and then the purring of the car engine.

A hand shook Ken's shoulder. "Ken, time to wake up," came Linda's voice. He opened his eyes to see Linda, dressed.

Linda nodded politely and turned.

"Wait," Ken said, sitting. His voice sounded heavy with sleep.

Linda turned back slowly, gazed at Ken.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, her face stern.

"I don't believe that. Something's bothering you."

She glanced away, her lips pressed together. "All right. Margot never lets me have any freedom. She thinks I'm just a puppet, and it's been that way for years. She doesn't believe I have my own will and mind."

"I know you do," Ken said. "I'll have to talk to Margot, because this is getting out of hand."

"No, she won't listen!" Linda said. "I ... I'll find a way. Don't hurt your marriage with her. Go take your shower now. Julie's not up yet, so I can make you breakfast." She turned and left the room.

Ken fell back on his pillow with a sigh.

Two extra hours at work gave Ken an aching back. During the day, he had tried several times to call both Margot and Linda, but each time his phone rang or his computer told him he had an incoming message, and he had to attend to business.

Whatever Margot thought, Linda was part of their family. As a person, rather than simply a mystical construct, she deserved better than a life of servitude.

When Ken arrived home after eight, his neck ached and his belly tingled with worry.

He opened the door. Margot rushed to him, her eyes wide. "Ken, have you heard from Linda today?"

"No. I tried calling both of you all day long, but I was so busy. Why?"

"She's still not home." Now, Ken heard the quavering fear in his wife's voice. "I've heard nothing. I don't know if Julie is well, or if one of them was hurt —"

Ken removed his jacket and tossed it onto the couch. "Honey, why didn't you call me?"

"Your phone and IP were busy every time I tried!"

Ken rubbed his rough face. "Of course. Did you call Jessica? Or any of your other friends?"

"Everyone! I called everybody, I —"

"You have an incoming call request," said a voice from the bedroom. Margot turned and stared. Ken stepped past her, through the kitchen and into their room. He moved to the desk at the far wall and turned on the computer's monitor.

A moment after he brought up the teleconferencing software, Linda's face

filled the screen. Ken saw Margot's identical reflection hovering in the glass above his shoulder, and felt his wife touch his hand.

"Linda," he said, "thank God you called. Are you all right?"

"What about Julie?" Margot asked, her hand tensing over Ken's.

Linda swallowed. "I'm not going to let you absorb me back anymore, Margot."

Ken heard Margot's breath catch in her throat. In the screen, her reflection froze. "Linda," Ken asked, "where's Julie?"

"Ken, please," Linda said, her chin shaking as tears formed in her eyes. "Please, let me talk!"

"I do —"

"Where is Julie!" Margot shouted.

Linda cringed.

"She's here. She's fine," Linda said. She bent down, vanishing from view for a moment, then rose, holding Julie in her arms. She stroked the girl's back. Giggling, Julie looked through the screen.

"Bring her home, now," Margot said.

Linda shook her head. "If you don't promise not to absorb me, I will leave with Julie."

Ken swallowed. For a moment dizziness seized him. He closed his eyes.

"No, you won't!" Margot's voice rang in Ken's ears. "You bring her back, now, or ..."

"Or what?" Linda asked.

"Ken, trace her IP address —"

"He can't," Linda's voice said through the speakers. "I encrypted it."

"Please, listen to us," Ken said. He leaned toward the screen and the small cameras on either side turned to focus on him. "Julie's not part of this. She's innocent."

"I'm as much a mother to her," Linda said. "But I will bring her back, if Margot agrees to let me go."

Ken watched Linda's eyes dart between the screen and Julie. She licked her lips.

Ken gazed at his wife. She turned her wide eyes toward him, then said, "Who do you think you are, Linda? You are part of me. Shouldn't I have a right to what is part of me? You come home, and bring Julie —"

"Just a minute," Ken said to Linda. He turned to his wife and whispered, "Think about this! Are you sure about that anymore?"

"Ken?"

"Yes, Linda?"

"I'll miss you."

"I'm calling the police," Margot said, reaching past Ken to grab the phone.

Ken gripped her arm. "Don't."

"Merde!" Margot shouted, turning and stamping her foot. "What in the hell do you think you're doing?" Margot spoke quickly, making her French slightly more difficult for Ken to understand. "Julie is not your daughter, Linda!"

"You say I'm part of you. If that's true, how is she not my daughter?"

"She's right," Ken said in a half whisper. "It doesn't work both ways."

"Bring back Julie now!"

"Margot," Ken said, "let's go in the kitchen to talk."

"No! How can I leave this room —"

"Margot!" Ken shouted.

She stared at him, the curve of her black hair framing her face and reddened cheeks.

"I hate yelling at you," Ken said. He turned to the computer screen. "Linda, don't disconnect, all right?"

Her mouth curved up and a tear escaped her right eye. "D'accord."

Ken reached for Margot's hand, but she swept past him into the kitchen. He stepped out of the bedroom behind her.

"It's not right, Ken. She belongs to me, and —"

"Stop it," he said. "She doesn't belong to anybody. You know what that's called, Margot? Slavery. I didn't know your attitude was so strong —"

"She's not a person! I don't know why she's doing this —"

"It's because she is a real person!" Ken shouted.

Margot crossed her arms. "I have obviously known her much longer than you. I know what I'm talking about when I say she is not. She has always been there to help me, since I first found I could bring her."

Ken bit his tongue, then frowned. *I can't let Margot absorb Linda, he thought. I can't let Margot keep on treating her this way.*

"Please," he said, "listen to her. I've seen it for months. She's gained a sense of her own identity, and she needs you to let her go."

Margot's jaw tensed. "I won't do that."

Ken frowned deeply. His chest felt heavy as he walked into the bedroom. When he reached the desk, he looked back, but Margot had not entered. "Linda," he whispered, "call me in an

hour at the Hilton. Ask for me, all right?"

"Why?"

"I'm leaving."

"No, you can't!"

"What is she yelling about?" Margot said.

Ken moved the mouse and clicked on the "Disconnect" button.

When he looked over his shoulder, Margot stood in the door. "I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said. "Maybe we can work this out."

"What?"

Ken took his keys from his jacket pocket and walked to the back door. "I love you," he said, "but you need some time to think."

Ken answered the ring of his hotel-room phone.

"Mr. Keller, your wife and daughter are here to see you," said the receptionist.

"Tell her —" Ken stopped himself. *Wife and daughter?* he thought. "Send them up."

Three minutes later, Ken heard a knock on his door. When he opened it, he smiled at Linda, who stood on the other side with Julie in her arms.

"Papa!" Julie exclaimed. He lifted his daughter. As he tried to hug her, she pushed away and gazed at him with a smile.

"I am so glad to see you!" he said. "Linda, come in. Julie, do you want a cookie?"

"Uh-huh," she said with a large nod.

"OK." Ken set Julie down and knelt. "I bought some chocolate ones on the way here. I'll give you one in just a minute."

Julie nodded and started to march around the room.

"I'm so sorry for all of this," Linda said. She took Ken's hand as he stood.

"Don't be." He embraced her. The



Artwork by Vincent Di Fate

feeling of her body against his eased his sadness. "Margot wouldn't listen to you. She was wrong."

The muscles of Linda's back felt hard. Ken and Linda gazed at each other for a moment, then pressed their lips together in a long kiss. Ken moved one hand along her back, and his other rested on her hip. He felt her fingers in his hair.

"Papa? Papa?"

A tug on his leg forced Ken to look down.

"Can I have a cookie?" Julie asked.

Ken let go of Linda. "I'm sorry."

"It's all right," she said, "but —"

"I want to work things out with Margot. Do you have somewhere to go?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes. I have some friends. I don't want to leave. You're my family."

"I know."

"Good," Linda said. With a smile, she squeezed Ken's hand, then departed.

For several days, Ken slept on the couch bed. Margot spoke little to him, and took Julie from him several times while he played with her or read to her. He felt headaches pounding in his temples at work, and he ate less, sometimes skipping dinner for lack of appetite.

Each night, he went out with friends, either to a movie or a cafe, but his thoughts remained on his wife and family.

She's too stubborn, he thought. She won't listen to me, and I don't know what to do.

On the fifth night after Linda's departure, Ken went to a bar alone. He swallowed mouthfuls of his second beer while classic rock filled the smoky room and football blared from the corner television.

"Funny to meet you here," said a woman.

An instant later, he realized that the voice had spoken in French.

He gazed up. "Margot?"

"Will you stop doing that?" Linda sat beside him and gazed at him. "I'm starting to miss you already."

Ken nudged her with his elbow and smiled. "Margot won't talk to me. I don't know what to do. What are you doing at a bar, anyway? How'd you know I was here?"

"I didn't." Linda took a sip from Ken's beer mug. "We're too much alike."

"That's strange. Margot and I are so different —"

Linda shook her head. "Not really. She's just more stubborn." She sighed. "I feel awful. It's my fault you're not getting along with her."

"No, it's mine."

"I took Julie! I didn't leave you much of a choice."

Ken shrugged. "That's true, but —"

"But nothing." Linda gazed at the polished table, silent for several moments before turning her gaze back to Ken. She ran her fingers across his cheek, and Ken leaned his face into her touch.

"I'll go back," she said. "I'll let her absorb me again."

"No, you can't do that —"

"It's my choice," she said. "I hate to see you so sad."

"Your freedom is more important." Ken stared into her eyes, so like Margot's, yet changed, softer.

Linda took his hand. "Ken, I love you. If only you were single." With a grin, she kissed him on the cheek, then stood and dashed out of the bar before he could stand.

Ken sat for a moment, frozen. He felt a pang of jealousy when he saw the heads of several men turn from the football game to watch Linda leave.

He stood and swept to the door. Outside, he heard the start of a car engine, then saw a white sedan pull away from the curb. The car was unfamiliar, but he recognized the angled black hair.

Clenching a fist, Ken started to run the two blocks home.

Ken put his hand to his chest, vainly hoping to calm the pounding of his heart. The night air went deeply into his lungs, stinging as he inhaled. He opened his front door and saw the identical women standing across the room. Linda had her head bowed, and Margot paced.

Crying, Julie tugged at her mother's leg.

"You didn't do it yet," Ken said, huffing. "Margot —"

"I'm thinking!" she shouted, staring at her husband.

"Don't yell at him!" Linda crossed her arms. "That's why I'm here. I don't want you two to fight over me anymore —"

"You don't have to do this, Linda —"

"Yes, I do, Ken." Her eyes met his, then she turned her sad face down and held her hands out to Margot.

"Maman!" cried Julie between sobs.

Margot bent down. "What is it? Why are you crying?"

"You were yelling. Are you going to stop now?"

"I —" Margot gazed at Ken, then at Linda's hands. Sighing, she stood and touched Linda's fingers.

When Linda's form began to puff out like steam, Ken closed his eyes and leaned back his head with a sigh. *I can't stay with her, he thought. She won't change.*

"Non," he heard, and he gazed back at his wife.

Margot faced the hearth, her head bowed.

Linda pulled back her hands. "You're not —"

"You can go," Margot said. "I'm sorry. Your eyes. I don't know what happened. You look different now. You don't seem like ... like me anymore."

"I'm not you."

Ken watched his wife's head nod, and a moment later he stepped toward her and rubbed his hands along her back. She jerked around to stare at him through a sheen of unshed tears, then bowed her head and let him wrap his arms around her.

Ken kissed his wife on the forehead, and turned at the sound of their child laughing. Linda stood by the couch, bouncing Julie in her arms.

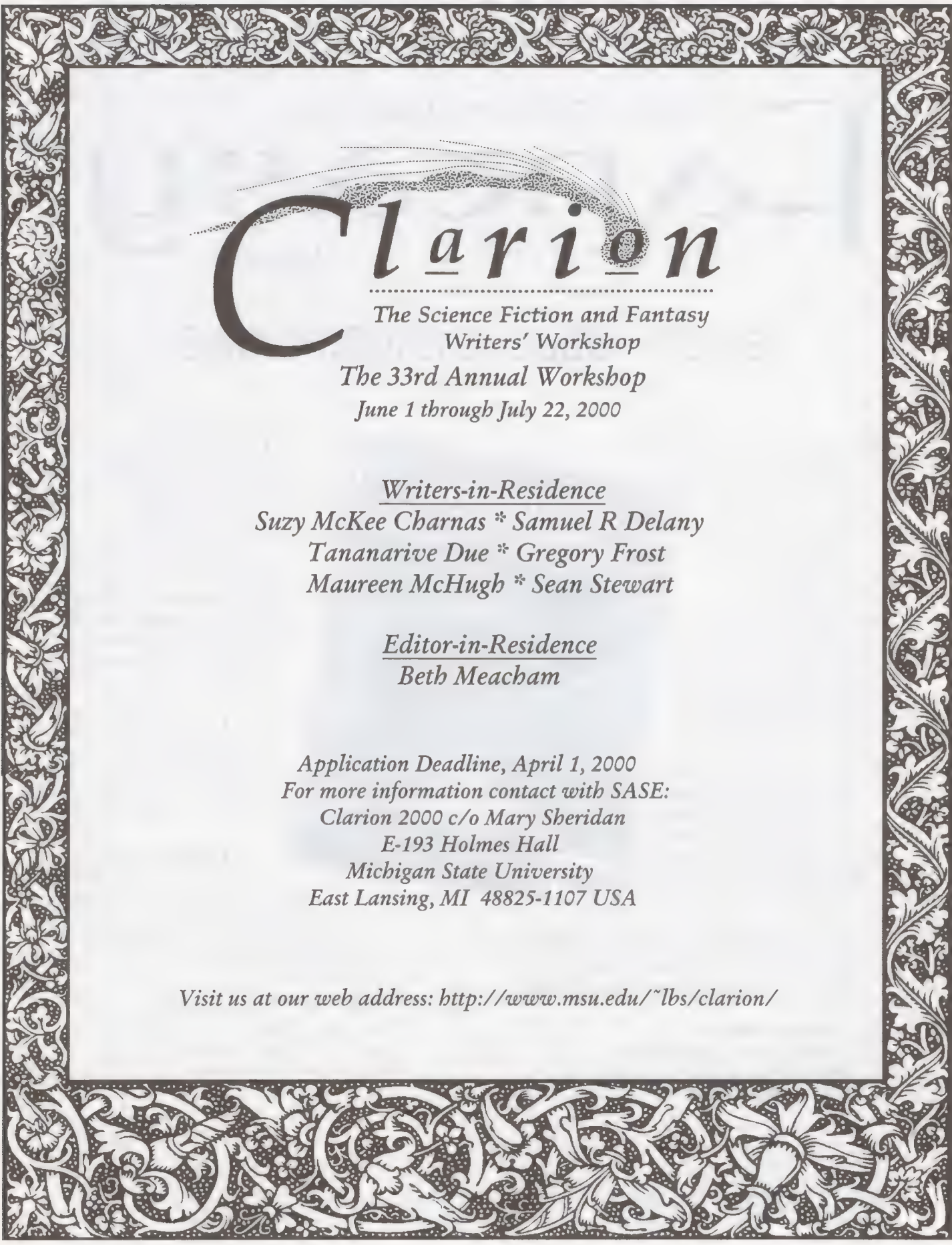
Ken found himself laughing as well.

When he gazed at Margot, for a moment he felt as though he was staring at a new person. She turned her eyes toward him as her tears rolled along her cheeks, down to her smile.

✱

JONATHAN FESMIRE has traveled to France, Germany, Estonia, Finland, and Ireland. He enjoys speaking French and learning bits of other foreign languages, but most of all, he loves writing. His first novel, **CHILDREN OF RHATLAN**, is currently searching for a home while he works on the next one.

VINCENT DI FATE worked in animated films before turning to freelance artwork. He received a Hugo as Best Professional Artist in 1979 as well as the Skylark and the Lensman Awards. He is regarded as one of the world's major illustrators of futuristic themes, including astronomical and aerospace themes for the National Geographic Society, CBS television, and NASA. Workman published **DI FATE'S CATALOG OF SCIENCE FICTION HARDWARE** in 1980. He was the Artist Guest of Honor at the 1992 Worldcon.



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Guest editorial by
Julian May.

1 4 (Fall 1991) *Black*

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1 6 (Spring-Summer 1992)

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- Leave a space beneath your name, and begin typing the story.

Double-space your manuscript (put a blank line every other line). Single spacing, or one-and-a-half line spacing, does not leave adequate room for editing, and makes your story harder to read.

Indent the beginning of each paragraph 1/2 inch; do not put three blank lines between them.

Put the page number, and your last name, at the very top of each page, leave four to six blank lines, and continue the story.

Do not use chapter headings in a short story.

At the end of the story, type "THE END" (not "-30-" or "-00-") so the editor will not wonder if she is missing the last page.

Contents

Proofread your manuscript. It helps if your proofreader can spell; and he/she should have a firm grasp of correct English grammar (as should you, by the way). Note that spell checking won't catch a spelling error if the mistake is a legitimate word (if, for example, you type "pair" instead of "lair").

Be sure your story conforms to the writer's guidelines for a particular market.

Make sure your stated word count is credible. A page of manuscript is about 300 words, so a 26-page manuscript claiming to be 5,000 words long is going to be regarded with suspicion.

Submission DOs and DON'Ts

Do not send simultaneous submissions. (That is, don't submit the same story to two markets simultaneously.)

If you send more than one story at once, include a separate SASE for each story. If you don't, rejection for one story will strongly encourage rejection for them all.

Do not send artwork with your story.

Do not submit your only copy of a story. **Always keep a copy in your files.**

Keep a log of where you send your stories, so you don't send the same story to the same market twice.

The Submission Package

Use a 9" x 12" envelope to send manuscripts longer than four pages. For manuscripts of up to four pages, a #10 business envelope is adequate.

Do not include a cover letter unless you have explicit instructions for the disposition of your manuscript, or unless you want your story considered for only one market. A chatty personal letter or synopsis of your story wastes the editor's time (though it is appropriate to include brief list of previous sales in this genre). If she buys your story, then she'll ask for your biography.

Send manuscripts by priority mail. Please do not use certified, registered, or express mail (unless you sign the signature release); we haven't time to wait in line at the Post Office to sign for them.

If you want your manuscript returned, include a large, self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE) with the enough return postage for your manuscript and a few extra sheets of paper, in your submission package. Stories without adequate return postage will be thrown out unread.

If your manuscript is disposable, include a #10 SASE in your submission package.

If you want proof that we received your story, include a self-addressed, stamped post card in your submission package.

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A good-looking manuscript never sold a rotten story; but certainly if an editor has two marginally acceptable manuscripts on hand, he or she will keep the one that is easiest to read. A professionally presented manuscript encourages the editor to regard you as a professional and take your story seriously — and you can't ask for more than that.

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Most typewriters produce six lines of type per vertical inch. Selectric type balls are coded with typeface and pitch, e.g. Helvetica 15.

The first page of your short story manuscript should look like the picture above left. The second and subsequent pages should look like the picture in the middle. The three # signs in the middle indicate a break in the story.

The last page finishes with the END or THE END, as in the picture on the right.

— Compiled by Rachel Holmen and Elisabeth Waters

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The Dragon Ate Broccoli

Lee I. Myers

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Myers - Dragon - p. 3

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The dragon heaved a sigh, and
flew away into the night. "So long,
Alduin," she said.

END



CROW CURSE

by Mary Catelli

Fritha stood by the edge of the pond, looking out over the rushes and the waters reflecting the half-full moon, and sulked. "It wasn't theft," she thought; "the hermit had said to take the books after he died." Fritha scowled, tossing back her dark brown curls from her pale, square face. "The books hadn't been on his body, anyway."

The moon climbed a little higher, and the hour came. Fritha cawed and spread her black wings. She flew to perch on the nearest bush. "Maybe," she thought bleakly, "Isobel had a point; the wizard who laid the curse, all those generations ago, might, God willing, decide they had learned not to steal from the bodies of the dead — but something that looked like stealing would change his mind."

The rest of the murder lifted up, cawing. Fritha glared at them. Off to steal all the seed Farmer William had planted, she thought in disgust; Lord have mercy on us all. She flew off. The wizard had not reappeared in seven generations, and while wizards lived long lives, they did not live that long. And neither Isobel nor any other of the crow folk could cast the first stone about theft.

Curses on Simon, anyway, Fritha thought, settling on a dead tree; it was his fault his family was cursed, and he was so old that he had only lived with the curse a couple of years. Fritha ruffled her feathers and wished she could leave the marsh, but where in the world could she go? One of their foolish young men had seduced a woman in the nearest village. His baby had been beaten to death after the first time he changed.

Golden light burst over the horizon. Fritha squawked, lifting off from her perch. Smoke started to rise where the light had come, obscuring the stars behind it. Fritha started to fly back, but further bursts of light caught her attention. Two figures, little more than doll-size at this distance, appeared in the middle of the light, floating over the treetops. The crow flew in low, glancing up now and then. Wizards, Fritha thought, and her mind conjured up a dream of one of the wizards having laid the curse, and now she could charge in and save him, and get the curse lifted. That would show Isobel.

A burst of scarlet light seared the ground next to her, and smoke thickly rose. Fritha flitted back. A dream, of course, she thought. These strange beings lived in another world, and needed no aid from human or crow.

Fritha perched to watch the fight. The bursts grew more and more fierce, ranging through every color of the rainbow. Below them, fires sprung up, and some of the bursts, going astray, made the earth shake.

One wizard threw out his arms, and with a final burst of light, struck down the other wizard. The light about the other one dimmed, and vanished; in the glow from the first wizard, Fritha could see him sinking like a leaf from a tree, but he fell past that light, and vanished. His fall had been so convoluted that he could go anywhere after that.

The other wizard laughed, the noise suddenly so loud that the marsh grass quaked beneath it. "Too late, too late, little Oliver! Nothing you and your family can do to save you!"

Fritha shrank back and looked at the fires. The fight could have lasted an hour, she realized, and nearly panicked. Without attention to the surviving wizard, she flew to the ground, just barely making it before her form shifted again. That had been cutting it too close, Fritha scolded herself as she hurried through the marsh; she ought not to let even fighting wizards distract her. She glanced over her shoulder. The surviving wizard had lowered himself just over the height of the marsh grass. The light around him cast fierce shadows as he peered over the water and land. Fritha turned away, before he could find her.

"Girl!" called a voice, sounding like a man at the last of his strength.

Fritha froze. The wizard could not have fallen this far, she thought, even with that convoluted path.

"Girl, I know you hear me," said the wizard. "Please, I beg you, do not turn away."

What, wondered Fritha, could make a wizard beg for help? She turned to face him. A gray-bearded man lay against a tuft of marsh grass. His elaborate robe glittered a little in the moonlight, except where blood caked over the cloth. He held out his hand; a ring glittered on it.

"Please, take the ring," he said. "Keep it from William. Give my brother it, when he comes." He coughed.

He could die before I take it, Fritha thought. To take from the bodies of the dead ... she stared blankly at the ring.

The wizard's thin, haggard face worked. "He will destroy us," he pled. "All my family — for no crime but thwarting him." His voice faded as he



spoke, and at his last word, his head rolled back.

Taking from the bodies of the dead, Fritha thought uneasily. She crept close to the body and looked up at the searching wizard, whose square face was set in lines of fury.

His voice boomed out again: "How dare you and yours question me? I have shown you what weaklings you are!"

If that man, thought Fritha, laid the curse, it will never get lifted.

The ring glittered in her palm. Fritha tucked the ring away and hurried through the marsh again. The other wizard was moving back and forth over the waters, and now she had more reason not to be found. She splashed through the shallow waters of a stream and climbed the other bank.

Bess's voice carried out of the shadows. "Fritha! What happened here?"

Fritha turned sharply. Half a dozen — a dozen — of the crow folk stood on the opposite bank, among the bushes on the rise of land, and stared at the wizard. Fritha drew in a long breath. "Two wizards were fighting. One of them is down." She gestured at the

other. "He's looking for him, I think."

"Is he?" Bess looked after him. "How interesting." She started down the bank.

"Bess!" Fritha said sharply. "If he sees you ..."

Bess looked over her shoulder and laughed. "He's looking for a wizard," she said. "Not a poor girl of the crow folk."

Fritha bit her lip. Bess had been the only other child of the crow folk who let the hermit teach her letters, but they did not get along. "Foolish," muttered Todd behind her.

"Who's going to stop her?" said someone else. A murmur of agreement ran through the crow folk. Fritha's shoulders slumped as she nodded in reluctant agreement; she had never been able to stop Bess from any folly. The crow folk started to pull back; Fritha could not help glancing over her shoulder as the wizard drew nearer and nearer the body. She was barely able to keep her hand from going to the pouch with the ring; it felt like an enormous weight on her belt.

Minutes later, Bess came splashing after them. "I was right," she said, half-laughing. "He was only interested in

the body." The crow folk looked at her, and she tossed her head. "Said someone else must have been there first." Her eyes bright, she glanced over at Fritha. "He was *angry*."

Fritha collected her wits and snorted. "Unless it fell out over the marsh," she said.

"He'll never find it then," Todd said. Bess's expression fell a little as she agreed. Fritha kept her face set, but her heart started to beat faster. Even if Bess wanted to denounce her, she had no evidence, she reminded herself, but her heart did not slow.

Fritha sat down at the table for her breakfast one morning two weeks later. Her father did not look up from his porridge. "The fires the wizards set have burnt out," he said to his wife. "Or so Ned says. I'm going fishing over there today."

His wife bobbed her head. "'Cept that Meg said that her Polly saw the wizards again," she said, without turning from the fire. "No sense in being where they are."

Fritha wondered if one of the wizards was the dead one's brother. She

bolted her porridge and announced, "I'll go weed the garden." Her father mumbled something. Fritha hurried from the room into the chilly morning air. The mist lay thickly over the marsh, but half a dozen women already sat on their thresholds, patching clothing or knitting socks. The old road, built over a century ago, when the queen consort had been born in the county, led into the marsh, but mist hid it after a few paces. Fritha went around back and got down on her knees to weed, but she looked out over the marsh for any sign of the wizards.

As if, she scolded herself a second later, she could see anything through the mist. She bent down over the plants and the dark earth and began to weed. The cold and damp seeped through her skirts, and Fritha weeded faster, trying to warm herself.

A ruckus rose out of the swamp, a confusion of quacking and honking, and Fritha looked quickly up. The air filled with ducks and geese over one pool, but she saw nothing more than their flight. Her mouth twisted as she looked back down. Any number of boys from the village might have tried to catch one, and set them off, she told herself; there was no clue that the wizards had been the cause.

In spite of herself, Fritha glanced back at the waterfowl. Something flashed in the whiteness of the mist. Fritha froze.

"Look at that!" shouted a child's shrill voice. "Is that what you saw, Todd?"

A burst of yellow lit up the mist from within and melted it away more quickly than the sun. The crow folk piled out of their cottages, shouting and exclaiming. "Maybe the wizard's going to lift the curse!" one hopeful said, and they all chattered about the possibility.

Fritha sat back on her heels but could not move any further. Her legs felt very cold, but the pouch with the ring weighed heavily against her thigh; there had been times, now and then, in the last weeks where she could forget it (though she had not dared take it off), but now, she had to get rid of it. "I promised the wizard," she murmured, "and he was dying, too." She looked at the wizards fighting in the mists. How on earth could she tell which one was the brother, and which the foe, at this range? If she could, how could she catch the brother's attention?

Fritha got slowly to her feet, her legs complaining of her long kneeling. She shook them out, not taking her eyes

from the fight. Every one of the crow folk stood in the street, exclaiming fear of the wizard, or hope for the lifting of the curse. Her fingers traced the ring in her pouch. Lord help me, she thought.

"Everyone back!" Isobel's voice rose above the din. The old woman looked banefully around the crowd. "Back, away from the fight. Stop your staring! If he lifts the curse, 'twill do you no good if you die first."

The crow folk grumbled but obeyed. Fritha bit her lip, guessing this would be her only chance to be rid of the ring. She stepped closer to the cottage, hiding beneath the thatch as the crow folk pulled back, and hurried the other way.

Light exploded from the air, illuminating the whole marsh; Fritha threw up an arm to protect her eyes, but it burned away the mist and revealed a third figure, floating barely above the height of the water. Fritha ducked down, low among the grass, and scurried toward him: a servant, a kinsman, someone who could reach the fighting wizards.

A young man, not ten years older than Fritha, watched the wizards with narrowed eyes. His thin, sharp face reminded her of the dead wizard, far more than the survivor. Fritha frowned, wondering how to tell. Her foot stepped on a dry twig.

The young man looked sharply around at her at the crack. He blinked. Fritha licked her lips and stepped forward quickly.

"The wizard, who died here," she said.

"Uncle Oliver?" The young man skimmed over the reeds to reach her. "You saw Uncle Oliver's death?"

Fritha swallowed. "Not only saw," she said. "He left something with me."

"The ring?" Her face must have betrayed her, for the man's anxious expression lit up radiantly. "So that's why Father can withstand him." He came within a pace of her and held out his hands. Fritha fumbled with her pouch and pulled out the ring. The young man snatched it and bolted into the air toward the fight.

Fritha's hand stinging from the quickness, she stared after him for a second. He dodged an attack and joined one of the wizards. Fritha scurried off, before the fighting could intensify. She felt light-headed with relief; the wizards might be ingrates, but the ring was gone.

Away from the fight, the mist thick-

ened. Something rustled in the bushes ahead of her. Fritha hurried, not daring to see if it were a bird; she bit her lip as she wondered what the crow folk would do if they knew.

The village was empty, except for Bess; in the morning light, Bess's neat blonde hair shone brightly as she walked down the road. Fritha wondered what Bess was up to. No good for me, Fritha thought.

"Fritha and Bess!" called someone out of the last scraps of mist ahead of them. "That's who's missing. And I don't think they ran off to see the hermit this time."

"We did not." Bess's voice ran ahead of her. Fritha slowed down. "I saw Fritha was up to something, and followed her." The mist thinned a little, and Fritha saw Bess standing, with her hands on her hips. "I saw her giving something to one of the wizards — something she had taken from the body of the dead one."

A hiss ran about the villagers as the crow folk drew in their breaths in horror.

"How could she?" Fritha barely recognized her mother's voice. "How could she do this to us? After all we've done!"

Fritha, her blood all but congealing in her veins, walked slowly toward them. She rehearsed her excuses.

Bess turned. "And here comes the culprit herself, sneaking back to pretend nothing happened." Her delicate features contorted, her lips pulling back from her teeth. "How could you?" she snarled.

"What else could I do?" Fritha said, her voice thin.

Isobel broke in, her voice hoarse but loud, "What else? What else? Vicious little child, how could you not think of not doing it?"

Fritha tried to speak, but a rock came hurtling out of the crowd, striking her cheek. Fritha's hand rose to the blood. Her parents wrung their hands and stood back; the rest of the crow folk surged toward her.

Between one second and the next, they all changed to crows.

Fritha took to the wing. She had seen them mobbing owls far bigger than she. The crows cawed raucously and swarmed after. Ahead of her, the wizards' fight had ended. She could not scare them off by dodging too close to the fight, Fritha thought in despair; she had no recourse but to outfly them, if

she could.

A crow slammed into her from behind, knocking her toward the ground. Fritha frantically fought to regain her flight, but the crows flocked around her: battering their wings and pecking, and all the time keeping up the endless din. Fritha struck the earth halfway through the marsh, and the murder encircled her.

The cawing changed its note suddenly, so distinct that even half-dazed, Fritha could make it out, and the crows pulled back. Fritha lifted her head, and a hand closed around her. The murder cawed at the young wizard a little, but even their rage could be quenched by fear. His face grim, he settled Fritha in his arm and took to the air again.

I'm dreaming, thought Fritha, almost happily; it's all over and I'm dreaming. The ground swept by, below, but she felt no wind in her face. She stared down, at fields set out as squares and rectangles, at pastures dotted with tiny sheep and cows, at flocks of birds flying over a glittering river.

Suddenly, the change came again, and Fritha found herself sprawling in the wizard's arms. The wizard yelped and, unable to keep his grip, dropped her. Fritha shouted; here, she could feel the wind. The wizard plummeted after her and grabbed her arm. Fritha shouted again as he strained her bruised and bleeding shoulder, dragging her back up to his level and holding her there with one arm about her waist.

"Are you all right?" he said anxiously, his face not an inch from hers. Fritha, trying to catch her breath, could only nod. The wizard shook his head. "It's a good thing that Father wanted to thank you."

He turned his attention ahead, and his flight grew faster, the ground whipping by, until a gray castle, perched on a green mountainside dotted with cliffs, appeared ahead of them. Fritha gulped at the towers and arches; no engineering could hold that up. Then, she thought, they were wizards.

The wizard settled out in a courtyard, and the smell of baking bread rose from the building next to him. A chubby middle-aged woman, her gray hair flying about her face, bustled out of the castle. She looked at Fritha, aghast, as the wizard helped her stand, but after a second turned to him and put her hands on her hips.

"My word, Master Roland, what happened to the girl?"

Roland released Fritha. "Look after her, Tansy; I have to see my father." He swept off. Tansy muttered under her breath but ushered Fritha into the hall.

The wizards appeared again, as Tansy fussed over Fritha's injuries. Tansy scurried aside. Fritha looked up to meet Roland's father's eyes and sat up straight, putting her feet under the chair.

"She's doing well, Master Arthur," Tansy said, "but she needs to rest."

Arthur nodded. "She may rest here. Prepare her a room."

Roland snorted as Tansy bobbed her head and hurried out. "Of course she can," he muttered. Arthur's mouth tightened, and he looked at his son, but Roland looked back with bold eyes. "You wanted to offer her your gratitude. And I think it likely that her injuries are a consequence of her actions." He tilted his head to one side, looking at Fritha inquisitively. Arthur looked at her, his eyes darker but as attentive.

Fritha nodded.

Roland leaned forward. "How did that happen? All those crows were people, were they not?"

Fritha bobbed her head. "The crow folk." They watched her in silence. Her fingers twitched her skirt. "It begins with my ancestor, Simon," she said, cautiously. "He and his grandchildren came upon where bandits had killed some travelers, and looted the bodies." Silence reigned as she drew a deep breath. "One of them was the beloved son of a great wizard. In a great rage, the wizard cursed Simon and his children to be carrion crows for an hour every day, when the moon was the highest in the sky, to teach them to respect the bodies of the dead."

"That sounds like great-great-grandfather Walter," said Roland, brightly.

"Roland," said Arthur, in rebuke.

Roland looked at his father and blinked his eyes. "What, you don't think it does?" Arthur's eyes narrowed. "And his youngest son did die young and violently."

Arthur pulled back. "Not in front of commoners," he said, his voice low. Roland grimaced, and Arthur raised his hand. "Let the lass tell how what it had to do with her injuries," he said, ponderously.

Fritha licked her lips. "Well, he said it was to teach them respect for the dead, so we tried to get the curse broken by not touching the dead."

"A worthy lesson," said Arthur, his

voice a deep rumble.

Fritha's voice slowed. "The wizard, your uncle ..." She gestured at Roland. "He asked me to give you the ring, but died before he could give me it." She licked her lips again. "I had to take the ring from his body. When I gave you it, they discovered how I had got it, and thought the wizard would think they hadn't learned it."

Roland said, waspishly, "An unworthy lesson, if it teaches these folk to ignore the dying. If it is Walter's, it might be liftable."

Arthur snorted. "An ungenerous sort of folk. To ignore people for a dubious advantage." Fritha wondered, waspishly, if he had ever been a crow, feeling more sympathetic to Isobel than she ever had before. Arthur, oblivious to her thoughts, turned to her, and inclined his head. "We are grateful to you" He hesitated, his face showing consternation at being unprepared.

"Fritha," she said quickly.

"Fritha. We would gladly let you recover from your injuries as a guest at our home."

Fritha bobbed her head and thanked him.

"I will have Tansy show you the way." Arthur turned to his son and said, "Roland, see to finding the book about the ring in the library."

"Library?" squeaked Fritha, before she could control herself. Arthur looked at her with pursed lips. Fritha collected herself. "I beg your pardon, sir, but there was a hermit by the swamp, that taught me my letters."

Roland's face brightened. "A most learned peasant," he said to his father, and turning back to Fritha, added, "Certainly you may read such works as you find there."

The mid-morning light filtered into the library. Fritha surveyed the titles on one shelf. She glanced about the room again, unable to keep from wondering at so many books. I ought, she thought, to look them all over before I start reading. Her heart pattered with excitement; not only had she escaped the marsh, but to such a place!

Fritha reached for a book and found herself extending a wing. After squawking in surprise, she flitted to the nearest chair to perch on its back. She had never been so surprised as this morning, she thought; the library must have driven it from her mind. She ruffled her feathers, and grumped for a minute

about spending an hour waiting before she resolved to make the best of it. Tilting her head to one side, Fritha contemplated the shelves; she could look at the higher titles more easily now, she concluded.

Tansy's voice thundered in the room, pulling Fritha's head up. "How did that thing get in here?" Tansy charged across the room with raised broomstick in hand. Cawing, Fritha took to the air. Tansy, her face flushed, stared after her; Fritha circled the library and settled on an upper window. Tansy scowled and called for other servants. Fritha nervously shifted her perch.

The servants came and stared; one of the men ventured off in search of a ladder; long minutes later, the librarian peered at the crow through spectacles and declared they must consult with Master Arthur. "The spells should have kept the crow out," he declared. "If they are breaking, Master Arthur must see to them."

That's good, thought Fritha; Arthur will know what is going on. She changed form again, hitting against the stone of the window frame with bruising force. The servants gaped. The man with the ladder came in, and stared with the rest, but Tansy collected her wits. "Go get her down," she ordered, "and the rest of you, you have work to do!"

The servants dispersed. A kitchen maid hesitated longer than most and, as Fritha came down the ladder said, "Like the crow in the west sitting room."

"What crow?" asked Fritha sharply, as she stepped off the last rung. The kitchen maid cringed; Tansy gave Fritha a glance like the ones she gave Arthur or Roland.

"There's a statuette," Tansy said warily, "that's of a crow. It's a magic thing, we think. Master Arthur's great-grandfather made it."

"Walter?" said Fritha, sharply. Tansy bobbed her head.

Fritha drew a deep breath, and asked to see it. Tansy led her off to see a small thing of black glass, perched among scores of trinkets. In spite of their glitter, it held her eye. Fritha licked her lips and knew what she had to look for first in the wizards' library; Walter might have written about his work.

Fritha bent over the book, straining her eyes with the tiny, crabbed writing and stiff with the hours she had spent. She turned the page once more, and

read on, her eyes passing so reflexively the words nearly did not sink in. It took her a second to go back and read again, to confirm.

The change to crow overtook her, and she swept from the library, startling servants with her caws of delight, and out into the open air, where her caws echoed from the mountains. She circled the castle, stretching her wings for the hour, and flew back to the library, to make the most of her discovery.

Roland stood over the book she had been reading and frowned. Fritha flitted up as the change came, and stood beside him.

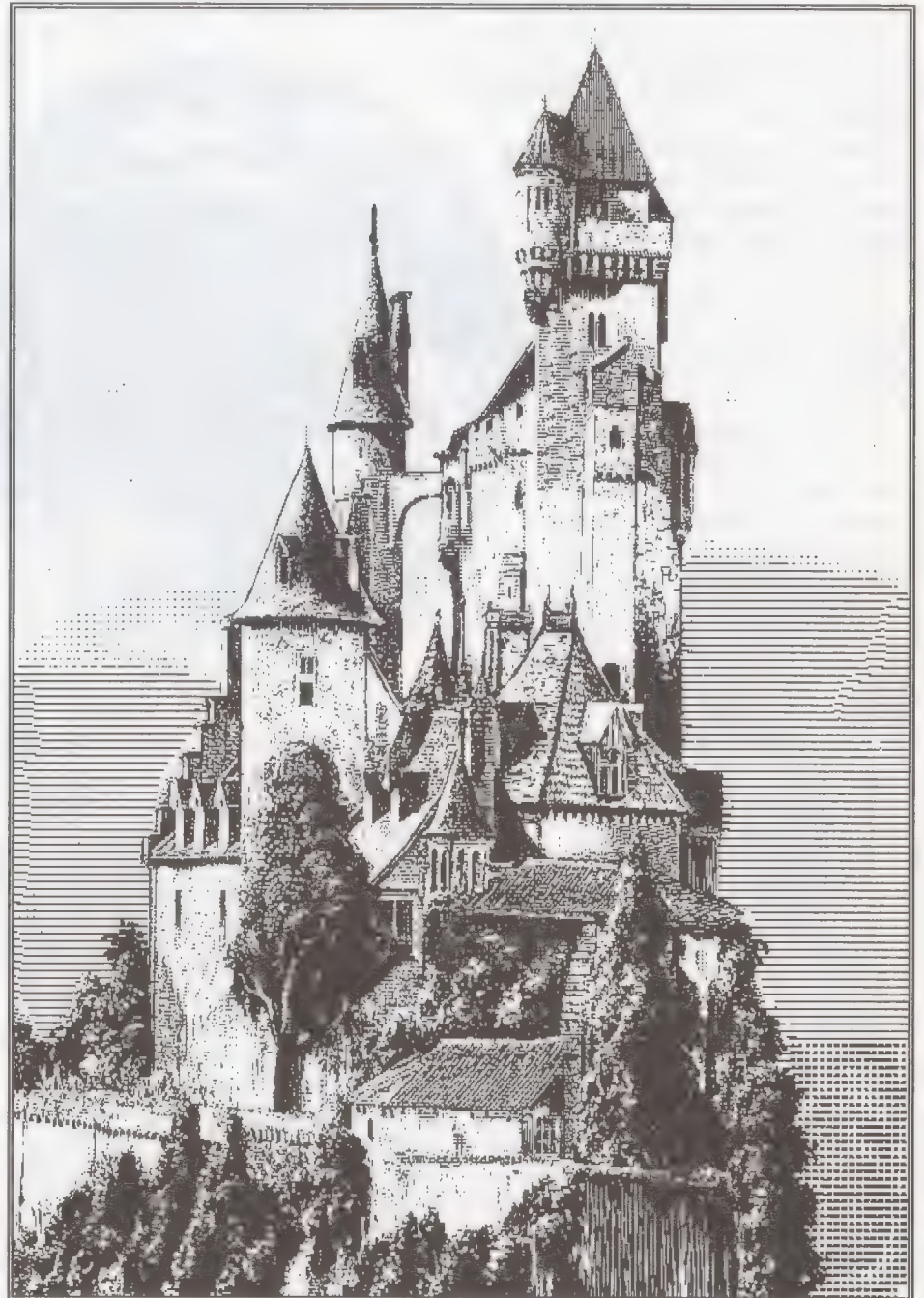
Roland looked up. "What is this?"

"Your great-great-grandfather's book," Fritha said. She smiled radiantly. "He laid the curse on my folk, and a great many others beside." Roland looked grave. "And most of them seem disproportionate to the crime, and fall on generations to come more than the criminals."

"Most unfair," Roland said.

Heartened, Fritha said, "And the charm for the curse on the crow folk is just a statuette of a crow; Tansy knew of it." She glanced at him. "Certainly I would be most grateful for the lifting of the curse."

Roland's eyebrows went up, and he



Artwork by Nicholas Jainschigg

took up the book. "Certainly, we must consider this." He vanished from the room, and Fritha turned to look at the shelves. Why, she thought, if Arthur lifted the curse, she could venture anywhere in the world. Humming, she looked for books about other lands.

The hour caught Fritha by surprise again, and she flitted to the back of her chair. She gave the account of the city of Mellitta a longing glance, but took to the air to fly about the castle once. Had to stretch sometime, she thought, perching on a gutter to ponder whether to circle the castle again.

"Look at them, Father!" Roland exclaimed from the nearest window. "Hundreds of curses, for generations. We can't just watch them!"

Fritha froze. She could not help but strain her ears.

"I have looked at them," Arthur said. "Good solid work, too; they have lasted this long, and all that is needed to break them is to break the charm he used."

"But, Father," said Roland, exasperated, "we can't just let the curses run. It isn't as if anyone that Walter laid a curse on is still alive."

"Some of them may be," Arthur said mildly. "Some of them were laid on wizards. We can't just lift them all; Walter may have had good reason for them."

Who let Walter decide who deserved a curse? thought Fritha.

"I will investigate them all, in order," said Roland, haughtily. Fritha cringed; the crow folk had been one of Walter's last victims.

"How is Fritha recovering?" Arthur asked.

"Well," said Roland. "She will be able to leave shortly."

"That's good," Arthur said. "I would never have let her stay here had I known how much she would disturb the servants. Why, the cook burnt a dish, the first day, because she ran off to stare at Fritha as a crow."

Fritha silently took flight again, soaring back down to the library. Who was the benefactor here? she thought mutinously. She perched on the back of the chair. The rest of the crow folk might have done nothing for the wizards, but she had — and what right had the wizards to declare the curse, even on the unhelpful crow folk, was right?

The change came long before Fritha

stopped fuming. She settled back down in her chair, but found the book not as engrossing as before her flight.

Fritha looked at the page again, the writing turning into black blurs. The lore it held was marvelous, but in the last day, she had lost much of her taste for reading. Her teeth closed on her lower lip; perhaps she could go back to the crow folk, the rescue by a wizard might have frightened them, she thought, but shook her head. Isobel would complain that she had not parlayed the wizards' gratitude into the lifting of the curse. Fritha sighed.

Roland walked into the room. "How are you faring, Fritha?"



Fritha turned in her chair and nodded to him. "Better," she said.

"Tansy told me you would be well soon."

Fritha let out a long breath. "She told me so this morning." Actually, she admitted to herself, I could go now.

Roland nodded and went over to the shelf to get his book. He turned back to her with it in hand. "I looked at the curses you showed me, to see if any of them are falling on the innocent," he said, heartily. "Because I must worry about William, it will take time." He shook his head. "So much work, in due time and proper order." Fritha looked at him sharply, wondering if he had decided that the crow folk were guilty. Obviously, Roland nodded to her and left. Fritha watched him with narrowed

eyes. All this pother about an act of a second: breaking the charm.

Her heart stopped for a second, and started to race, pounding in her ears. It did not need the wizards, either; she could easily break the charm herself. Fritha swallowed, looking blankly down on the book. They cared so little about the curses that it would not be hard for her to steal it.

Carefully, she put the book away; they would notice that she left it, when she was not a crow. She walked out into the corridor, trying not to glance around as if she were afraid of being seen, and took her way to the sitting room. Some of the servants glanced at her curiously, but turned back to their work as she walked by. Fritha took hold of the doorknob, thought, Lord, prosper my work, and opened the door. No one moved inside. Fritha drew a

deep breath, walked across the room, and picked up the crow. Holding it carefully in the palm of her hand, she walked down the hallway and out of the castle. A few servants greeted her; she nodded to them, and started briskly off down the mountain. She kept her ears cocked, every second, but no uproar, resulting from a discovery, followed her.

Fritha reached the nearest cliff, the wind from it chilling her and tossing her hair, and looked down at the rocks at its foot. She pitched the charm up, as far as she could throw it. It soared into the air, glittering in the afternoon sunlight, and fell again. A long minute later, Fritha heard a faint sound that must have been its breaking.

Fritha smiled. The curse was broken, and she was free and could go anywhere.

Well, except the marsh, she noted; neither her parents nor anyone else would believe that she broke the curse. Her smile deepened as she started down the mountain. So faring through the world would kill two birds with one stone, she thought merrily: seeing the world and getting away from the marsh.

✱

MARY CATELLI's work has appeared in *Cricket*, various **SWORD & SORCERESS** anthologies, *Tomorrow*, and *MZB's FANTASY Magazine*.

NICHOLAS JAINSCHIGG lives in New York City with his wife Monica.

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That particular Tuesday, I had gotten up a bit early, and gone into the kitchen and made up a small batch of low-fat, low-salt biscuits. I gathered the fresh, hot biscuits into a clean linen towel, put them in a basket, and added a jar of blackberry jam my brother and his wife had made. I took the basket, and my trusty Sony microcassette recorder, and went to visit Marion, to discuss with her the finishing touches for issue 45.

Marion was pleased to see me. "I never met a biscuit I didn't like," she beamed, and ate one or two while we talked. She dictated a column into my recorder, a method of working that we had developed together. I thanked her and headed for the office, offering the leave the uneaten biscuits, but she urged me to take them with me. She seemed a little out-of-breath from dictating, but otherwise she was well, if frail as always.

I went to the magazine office, transcribed the tape, and prepared the editorial from it. Margaret Davis and I worked hard that day, checking over the issue to be sure that story titles and author bylines were correct, ads were properly placed, and so on. Margaret left and I continued into the evening, writing my own "Last Word" column. Around 9:30 P.M., a thunderstorm came up, startling me — here in Berkeley, thunder and lightning are rare events, happening only once every several years. I decided I'd better shut off the computers, to avoid having them damaged in the event of a power surge, and so I went home.

The next morning, we stacked up artwork, checked it against the pages once more, and were planning to head to the printer when Raul Reyes mentioned, as he left to get the mail, that Marion was back in the hospital. He didn't sound unduly alarmed, but Lisa came in a few minutes later and indicated concern. She left to visit Marion almost immediately, and I figured I'd get a report on her condition when I got back from the printer. Marion had been hospitalized earlier in September, just overnight, for what we had come to think of as "a tune-up" — undergoing procedures to remove fluid from her lungs so she could breathe. I hoped to see her home in a few days.

But I was shocked when I learned just how bad Marion's condition was this time. Apparently, during the same lightning storm that had caused me to turn off my computers, Marion — who was watching one of her favorite TV shows — suffered a serious heart attack that deprived her brain of oxygen for a significant period of time. Even Raul, a few rooms away, had not been aware when the attack began; when he heard a commotion, he had rushed to her and did CPR, then called 911. Though she was taken immediately to Alta Bates Hospital (which was less than ten blocks away), and though everyone on the magazine staff and in her

household visited her in the hospital over the next few days, she never regained consciousness or recognized any of us again. For a few days, we hoped; as even her cardiologist said, she was a very tough lady and had surprised us all several times by surviving things that would have been fatal to anyone else. (Susan Bound's letter on page 40 provides additional details.) But this time, it seemed there would be no recovery. Her wishes in this situation had been very clear:

no artificial prolonging of her life. So the decision was made to remove her from the machines which assisted her breathing and regulated her heartbeat, and early Saturday evening, a great woman died peacefully.

By this time, the magazine was at the "blue-line" stage, where we check a proof copy to be sure that everything is ready for

printing. Ann Sharp, the former editor of the Darkover Newsletter and Marion's trustee; Elisabeth Waters, Marion's secretary; and I decided not to change the issue to mention Marion's death. For one thing, we were already being overwhelmed by email and postal messages of encouragement and sympathy; also, *Locus Magazine* had released the news.

So please forgive us for not notifying the readers sooner. We felt that Marion's focus had always been on publishing good stories by new and established authors, and that *FANTASY Magazine* is not a vehicle for a "cult of personality" about Marion herself. Still, we know that many of you who read and subscribe to this magazine are Marion's loyal fans, that many of you have met her personally or corresponded with her, and that you've probably read many of her books.

In the letter column of this issue are a few of the literally hundreds of condolence messages which we have received. The messages were a great comfort to those of us who knew Mrs. Bradley well. We expect to publish some additional letters in the next issue, so if you have memories of Marion which you'd like to share, by all means send them to us.

For the time being, the magazine will continue, but we are looking for ways to make it profitable; Marion's heirs are not willing to continue it as a money-losing venture. Possibly we can find an outside buyer. We are still accepting fiction submissions and queries regarding nonfiction (interviews and ideas for columns such as "Writers Talk Back").

Marion selected about a year's worth of stories which have not yet been published, and I'm confident that I can choose new stories which she would have liked, had she seen them. So keep reading; you will see more stories that she picked.

And know that your participation, your reading of this magazine, your writing of Letters to the Editor, your submission of stories you hoped to sell to us, were a continuing source of pleasure and enjoyment to Marion Zimmer Bradley herself, and that she considered this magazine to be one of her greatest achievements.

— Rachel E. Holmen

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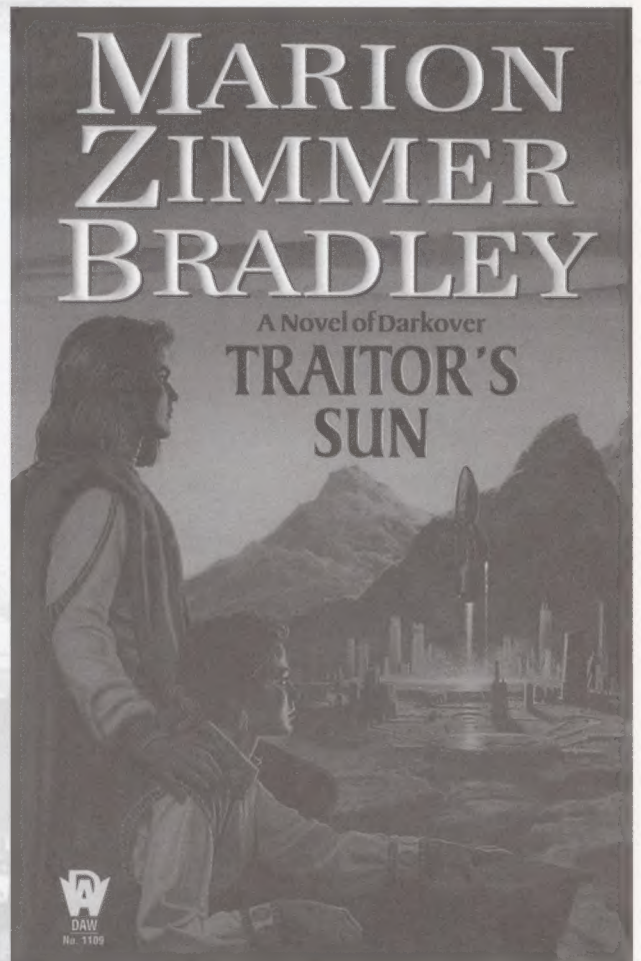
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